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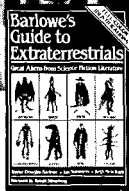
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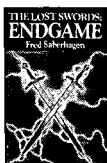
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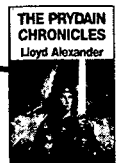
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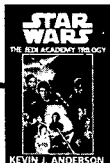
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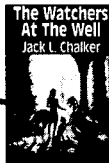
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SCIENCE FICTION

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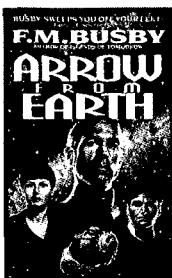
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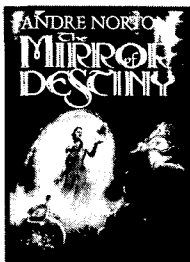
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GRESHAM'S LAW CONTINUED

I spoke last month of the operation of a kind of literary Gresham's Law whereby the flood of hackneyed mass-media-derived science fiction and endless rehashes of a few well-known series novels is driving out of print the kind of work that we used to cherish. In place of the thoughtful, provocative, powerful books that writers like Isaac Asimov, Fritz Leiber, Theodore Sturgeon, and other luminaries of the Golden Age gave us, we are inundated now by a sorry tide of third-rate stuff, a kind of print-media version of shabby "sci-fi" movies and television shows, that is leaving no room on publishers' lists for anything more seriously conceived.

I've been wrestling with this problem for nearly twenty years, now, ever since the immense popularity of George Lucas' *Star Wars* brought hundreds of thousands of new SF readers into the fold and forever changed the demographics of our field. So please forgive me if I give the subject some further mastication here.

I am not, by the way, arguing that *Star Wars* was a terrible movie (I liked it quite a lot) or that

the needs of the people who like to read novels set in the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* universes should go unmet. There has always been a place in our field for well-done action-adventure science fiction. I remember fondly the glorious space epics of Leigh Brackett and Poul Anderson and even Ted Sturgeon in the lively magazine *Planet Stories* of the 1940s; and I wrote plenty of stuff in the *Planet Stories* vein myself, later on. That kind of fast-moving, colorful, melodramatic fiction has a great deal to offer, especially to younger readers who might later go on to read, well, *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine.

What I *am* saying is that modern-day publishing's emphasis on the bottom line seems to be killing science fiction as a genre that appeals to adult readers. I loved *Planet Stories*, sure, but I doubt that I would have stuck with SF past the age of fifteen or so if I hadn't been able to move on to John Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction* and Horace Gold's *Galaxy*, with their great array of stimulating stories by Asimov and Heinlein and Blish and Sturgeon

and Kornbluth and Clement and so many other wonderful writers. We are heading to a point now, at least in book publishing, where the slam-bang kind of fiction is not only dominant but has driven our classics from print and is hurting the distribution and sales of new science fiction intended for an intelligent readership.

As I said last time, I don't like it. As I also said last time, I see no remedy. In a free-market economy, the bottom line rules. (In the Soviet Union, state-controlled publishing houses served up a steady diet of classic Russian novels, poetry, and the collected works of Lenin to a huge audience starved for books of any sort, and scarcely any popular fiction was printed. In today's anything-goes Russia, Dostoyevsky and Chekhov are taking a back seat to pulp fiction of the tawdriest sort. The readers are voting with their rubles, and the publishers have to pay attention, or else.)

So I am playing the part, I guess, of that stuffiest of old bores, the *laudator temporis acti*—he who praises the glories of the past at the expense of the present. (As Isaac's cherished W.S. Gilbert put it, "The idiot who praises, with enthusiastic tone/All centuries but this, and every country but his own.") I can't help it. I've spent much of my life reading and writing science fiction. I love it for its visionary potential; I hate to see it turned into something hackneyed and cheap.

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(Yes, I know, plenty of worthy SF of the classic kind is still being published. Just in the past few years we've seen Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars books and Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book* and Vernor Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep* and a dozen others equally worthy of taking their place beside the great books of the past. And I have no doubt that *Asimov's Science Fiction* has been for most of its existence a magazine that ranks with the *Astounding* of Campbell and the *Galaxy* of Horace Gold. But more and more, it seems to me, science fiction of this kind is being crammed into a corner of the field, published purely for reasons of prestige by houses who are making their real money churning out the formula books.)

The vanishing from print of most of the great science fiction of previous years, and its replacement by miles and miles of the less-than-mediocre stuff that we are offered today, has a number of unhappy consequences. I spoke last time of the disappearance of the classics as an influence on new writers. When young writers no longer have access to a broad historical overview of science fiction—when they are unable to absorb and digest and transmute, as we did, such books as Heinlein's *Beyond This Horizon* and van Vogt's *The World of Null-A* and Sturgeon's *More Than Human* and Bester's *The Demolished Man*, then a whole world of creative possibilities is lost to them: either they merely

strive to replicate the simple, badly written books that they think of as the best of SF, or else they expend their creative energies reinventing wheels that were better designed by the writers of a generation ago.

The vast oversupply of science fiction today exacerbates this problem. Publishers fighting for display space on the racks pour out eight, ten, twelve science-fiction books a month, hundreds a year all told. This keeps a lot of writers eating regularly, yes, but it also means that a lot of SF is published that never should have seen print. There are only so many writers at any one time who are capable of doing the sort of memorable work we crave. Just as expanding the major leagues to fifty or sixty baseball teams from the original eight will not bring forth a phalanx of new Babe Ruths and Ty Cobbs, so too will publishing a thousand SF novels a year instead of the dozen or so of years gone by not of itself unleash a horde of new Heinleins and Sturgeons. All that this overproduction of SF books has accomplished has been to make it impossible for anyone to read more than a fraction of what appears, thus depriving us of the invaluable sense of community we once had—that universe of shared references and concepts held in common, to be elaborated and embellished by all, that evolved when all of us were able to read just about all the science-fiction that was being published. No one now has much of an inkling of the total-

ity of what's going on in the field; there may be no overlap at all between one person's annual reading and another's.

The torrent of bad SF has the additional drawback of driving away mature readers who are just beginning to be curious about modern science fiction. Perhaps they read some Bradbury or Asimov long ago, and now they want to sample some of the current product; or it may be that they've never tried SF at all, and somehow have decided to sample it now. So they wander into the bookstore, stare with glazing eyes at the garish covers in the science-fiction section, finally pick up *Vengeance of the Galaxy Eaters* or the ninth volume of the *Glibabibion* Saga or the novelization of *Vampires of the Void*, riffle through it in growing dismay, put it back, and cross the aisle to the mystery novel section, where the interests of adult readers are currently being well attended to. And are lost to us forever.

It isn't the publishers' fault. They're simply delivering what the audience wants, as they always do. If an audience for Sturgeon or Blish or Bester is no longer there, and if

the work of modern writers of similar skill and ambition sells poorly also, they'll simply crank out the next *Glibabibion* volume, the one in which the Wand of Total Power is recaptured by the Lord of Utter Evil. What choice do they have?

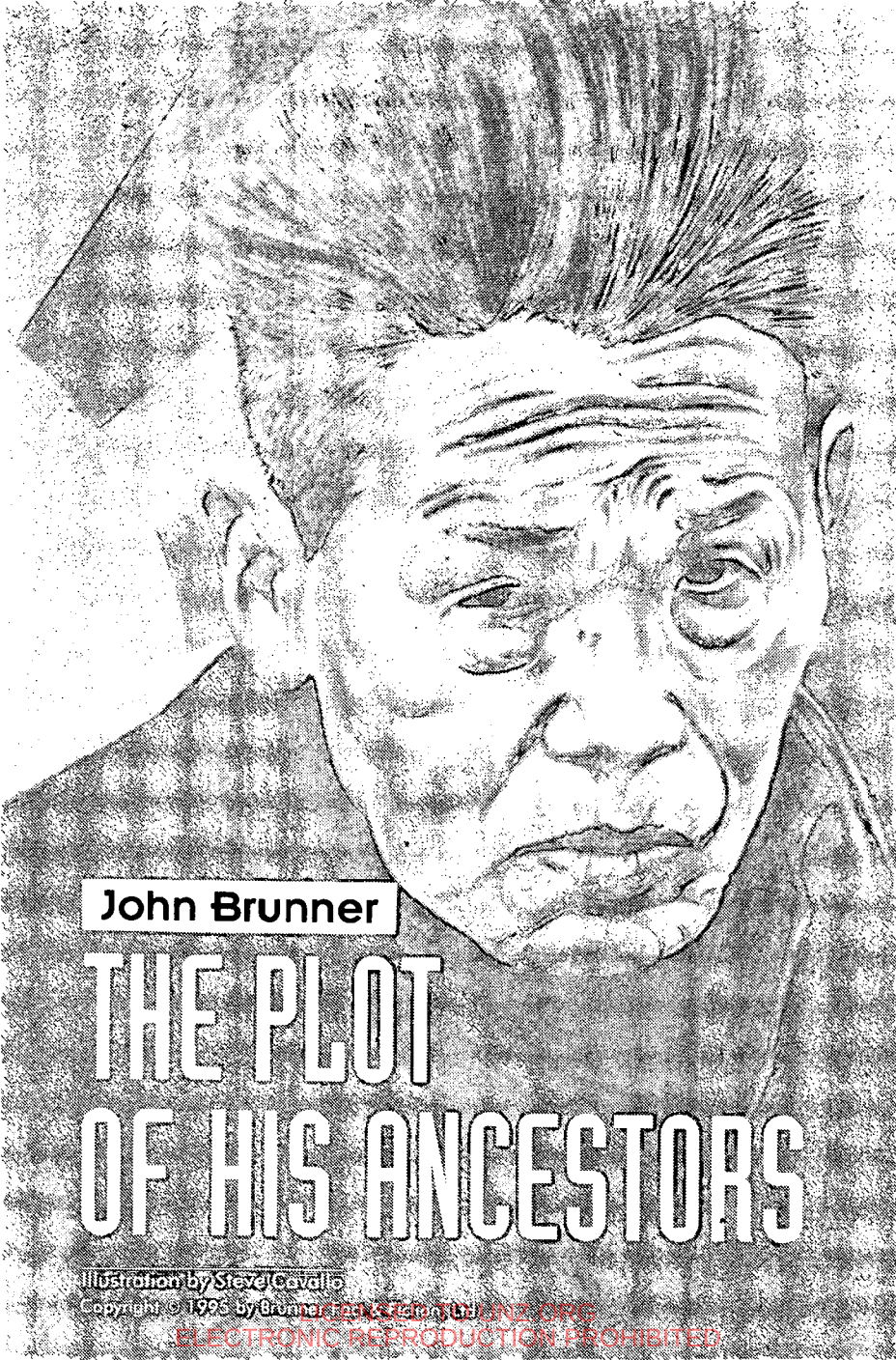
Writers of SF can't operate in a vacuum. Without an eager, demanding audience for first-rate material, it isn't possible to sustain for very long a career built on writing that kind of material. Seeing a book that you've spent a year and a half writing go out of print in six minutes is a disheartening thing. Eventually the best and brightest among us find some other way to make a living, perhaps in Hollywood, perhaps in some other field of fiction, perhaps by turning out their own versions of the Wand of Total Power stuff.

Readers not only get the kind of books they want, they get the kind of books they deserve. I don't begrudge the manufacturers of the interchangeable cotton-candy trilogies the audience they have won. I just wish there were some way for the work of writers who ask more of themselves and of their readers to stay in print. ●

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A man wearing a white cap and a dark jacket is looking upwards, his head tilted back. He is standing in front of a large, curved, metallic structure that resembles a futuristic or industrial interior. The structure has several rectangular panels or windows. In the background, a small, dark, conical object is visible on a flat surface.

John Brunner has set his most recent science fiction stories in China—the homeland of his wife, LiYi Tan. "The Plot of His Ancestors" is the second of these tales for Asimov's. The first one, "Good with Rice," was published in our March 1994 issue, and a third story is in our inventory.



John Brunner

THE PLOT OF HIS ANCESTORS

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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The top line of the sign hanging on the wire fence said in large clear characters PI MEN PARK CLOSED.

There was more, but that first impact forced Chen Deng-liang to close his eyes and sway. Park? What park? At the time he had left—been forced to leave—his home village, this area called Pi Men had been no such thing, but the graveyard where generations of villagers had buried their ancestors. So it still was . . . wasn't it?

Yet he could discern no sign of monuments or tombstones.

Oh, there had been so many changes! On his way here he had seen how Tongleng, the city that in his youth had been a morning's walk distant, had expanded like lava overflowing a volcano. The very air smelled different, for in the old days one was lucky to have a bicycle to get about on and a hand-barrow to deliver goods to market, whereas now the streets were choked with reeking buses, trucks and even private cars. He had sought familiar landmarks—buildings, farms, shrines—but in vain. Although for the most part the layout of the roads survived, and the course of the river monsters had been loosed, kin to a pair parked just beyond the fence: blunt-snouted ugly machines such as had already turned most of the village into a muddy building-site. These two were guarded by police with pistols.

Opening his eyes again, the old man forced himself to confront reality. Pines he remembered as saplings had attained full growth—and been crudely felled, most likely for fuel. Once there had been many mulberries, mementos of the time when silk had been an important industry in the area. A few survived, but they were outnumbered by rhododendrons, magnolias and other showy shrubs. Now even those were condemned to be grubbed up. The rest of the sign confirmed what lay in store, or he presumed it did. It was in the simplified script that had been introduced after his education was unceremoniously terminated save in the sense that he was sent to the country “to learn from the peasants,” and he deciphered it only with difficulty.

Moreover what he did figure out made little sense. Something about balls, and holes in the ground . . . and then there were some names, one of them foreign and another . . .

He found himself swaying again. He had had more than half his life to grow used to getting about on one leg and a crutch, but yesterday's journey had been long and tiring, and today his progress from the lodging-house where he spent the night had included many wrong turnings and dead ends. Even the skyline he recalled from his youth was much amended. The entire top of one of the hills that formerly had given this valley shape, made it safe and fortunate according to the ancient principles of *fung shui*, had vanished: so he had been told, to make an easier

approach to the new Tongleng Airport. Besides, they needed vast quantities of stone for its runways.

And there was a name on that sign he had hoped never to encounter again.

"Grandfather?"

A young man's voice, high-pitched, hesitant. At first Deng-liang didn't realize it was he who was being spoken to. Doomed to remain childless for the same reason that had cost him his leg, he had discouraged youngsters back in the distant region he now thought of as home from using that form of address, however kindly meant it might be. It felt too like mockery.

"Grandfather, are you all right?"

Wearily he dragged himself back to the here and now. As ever in densely populated China there were hundreds of people in the vicinity; equally as usual, they were for the most part displaying that disregard of one another which alone permitted even a pretense of privacy. A goodly portion, especially the older ones, wore part-mourning, appropriate garb for visiting the area where ancestors had been laid to rest—what he himself would have donned had he brought with him more than a single suitcase.

However, here was an exception. Gazing at him from an arm's length away was a concerned-looking youth in a short-sleeved shirt and jeans, sunglasses pushed up on his forehead. Hanging back, tugging at his arm to discourage him, was a pretty girl also in modern western garb, though hers was even more appropriate for this hot day: a dress that reached barely halfway down her thighs with no sleeves at all. Until this trip he had seen such attire only in pictures in foreign magazines, or the rare foreign films that found their way on to television.

"Thank you, I'm all right," Deng-liang husked.

Seizing her chance, the girl again tried to urge her boyfriend to leave. It seemed natural to think of their relationship in such terms. In the days when he himself had been a teenager, in this very village of Jiao Can, a girl who laid a bare hand on the bare skin of a boy's arm in public would have been such a cause for scandal. . . .

Reluctant, the youth was yielding. An instant before he actually turned away, however, Deng-liang cleared his throat. The other checked.

"The text of that sign. Would you confirm it for me?"

"Ah . . . Yes, of course." Blinking against the sun, the young man read aloud, "Site for a new eighteen-hole golf course with a luxury club-house for members only. A joint venture by Tokahara Incorporated of Osaka and Sun Tian-quan Enterprises—An-wen, quick!"

The two were barely in time to catch Deng-liang as he lost his grip on his crutch and threatened to collapse on the ground.

They helped him to a bench in the shade of one of the few remaining nearby trees. It was already occupied but enough respect for age endured for those in possession to make room. He was saddened, not for the first time, at having grown old enough to qualify for such courtesy without descendants or any hope of descendants. A tea-seller had set up her stand beside the fence. The young man sent the girl An-wen to fetch a fragrant cup of *pu-li*, hot and restorative, and when he had drained it his mind cleared.

He found the young man sitting beside him, his expression serious.

"Grandfather, you sound like a local person. Is your patronymic Chen?"

Given that in the old days four out of five families in Jiao Can had shared the same name, that was scarcely a brilliant deduction. He nodded.

"So is mine. I am Chen Ying-yi. So is my friend's: Chen An-wen."

Interested, Deng-liang supplied his own given name.

"You seemed disturbed," Ying-yi pursued, "when I read out the sign that now forbids entry to the park over there."

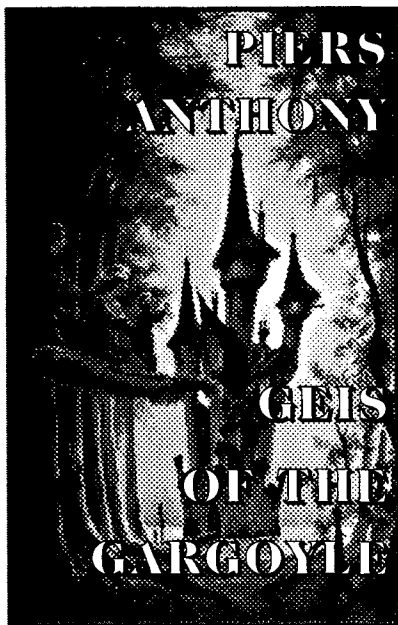
"I don't recall it as a park," Deng-liang muttered. "To me it was the place where our forebears reposed." From childhood he remembered the rounded green slopes concealing those elegantly formed porcelain jars full of ancient bones, which sometimes worked their way to the surface during rainstorms so that his and other families had to visit their respective plots and make sure they were secure. On his way here he could have sworn he had seen just such a jar for sale in a slovenly shop. . . .

But he had been clinging precariously to an overcrowded bus and could not be sure.

"You were plainly upset," Ying-yi persisted. "May we not inquire why?"

Abruptly Deng-liang was angry. A little, at any rate. These young people were being kind and displaying interest in one of their seniors' concerns; this was the sort of behavior he had been led to imagine was extinct outside remote rural areas like the one where he had spent the better part of his life. Yet he still didn't want to remember the name Sun Tian-quan. It was more bearable to shift the emphasis to an older and less personal affront. Feigning that this was what had most offended him, he snapped, "How do you expect a man to feel who comes home after more than half a lifetime's absence, hoping to pay final respects to his ancestors before joining them, and not only discovers their graveyard has been debased into a public park but also that it is now going to be turned into some sort of—of playground? With"—by now he was panting with such indignation it threatened to make him faint all over again—"with *Japanese* money! My parents, my grandparents, they witnessed the horrors of Japanese occupation! By a miracle we stopped them

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from conquering our homeland. But there doesn't seem to be anything we can do to stop them buying it instead!"

Listening, An-wen seemed to become more kindly disposed toward him. She said fiercely, "Especially since none of *us* will ever afford to play there! Do you know what they say it will cost even to join their golf club? Thirty thousand dollars!"

Somberly Ying-yi confirmed her statement, adding, "And that's not Hong Kong dollars, either. That's American dollars they're talking about."

Shaken beyond measure, Deng-liang blurted, "But it's the graveyard of our ancestors! Both of you are Chen like me, you said. From local families?"

Nods.

"Whose forebears are buried over there?"

Before either of them could reply, however, his shoulders slumped.

"Ah, you wouldn't have been brought up the way I was. Respect for one's ancestors was one of the things they denounced in the Cultural Revolution, one of the Four Old that Mao decreed must make way for the Four New."

"Don't be misled because we aren't in mourning clothes!" An-wen flashed. Blinking in surprise, Deng-liang stared at her. He had registered that she appeared to be young and pretty, but nothing beyond that because she wore a lot of makeup and he was of a generation to believe powder and paint could only spoil a woman's looks. Now he felt more than ever convinced that was correct. It was a shock to discover there was a real person behind the artificial mask.

She went on, "We may be studying modern, western subjects because we want to get ahead in life—he's learning about computers and I'm taking an acting course—but we haven't forgotten our roots. We came here today hoping to visit our family graves one last time because the bulldozers aren't scheduled to start work until tomorrow. But we were too late anyhow. They'd already put up the fence. They did it during the night. So all this has been wasted." She gestured at a basket on the ground beside her that he had not previously noticed. It was full of traditional grave-offerings: spirit money, joss-sticks, fruit, sugar-cane . . . Deng-liang found he was clenching his fists so tightly, the muscles in his forearms ached, even those on the left that had been strengthened by use of his crutch.

"The fence," Ying-yi said acutely. "Or more exactly the sign on it. It wasn't just the name of the Japanese company that offended you . . . An-wen, how about more tea? And come to that some noodles and broth. Here's the money." It was drawing toward midday and a noodle-cook

had also set up his stall to cater for the people—hundreds of them now—milling around in frustration at finding the park they were aiming for closed.

"Wait," Deng-liang forced out. "Don't they know about the graves? Don't they care?"

"Who are 'they'?" Ying-yi snapped.

The older man yielded with a sigh.

"I suppose I mean 'he,' but—Well, answer my question first."

However, it was An-wen who complied.

"Of course they know! They organized teams with metal detectors to plot the location of all the graves. Told them to take whatever they liked in return for making sure there weren't any pits the bulldozers could fall into and delay the schedule."

"I tried to get a job doing that," Ying-yi sighed. "In hope of preserving something, at least. But as soon as they learned I'm a Chen they turned me down. They're giving all the work to outsiders. Sun Tian-quan knows better than to rely on—Grandfather, are you *sure* you're all right?"

If the name belonged to the same man Deng-liang was thinking of, there was one thing about him unlikely to have changed even after so long. He said slowly, "Tell me, does this Sun have a scar on his left cheek? From the corner of his mouth nearly to his eye?"

The young couple exchanged startled glances. "Why, yes," Ying-yi said after a pause.

"My father's work."

How would his listeners react to that admission? For a moment Deng-liang feared he had made a mistake. Then their expressions changed to a blend of admiration and respect.

"Really? How was that?"

Much relieved, Deng-liang said grimly, "My father was the manager of a successful silk-goods enterprise. Sun Tian-quan and I had been at school together. He was a dullard whereas I was a diligent pupil, so he hated me. When he got the chance he led a gang of bandits to ransack our home. They called themselves Red Guards but they were no better than thieves. In trying to defend our belongings my father threw a roof-tile. It hit Sun in the face."

He closed his eyes. The vision of those terrible events was as fresh as yesterday.

"So they beat him to death."

There was a pause.

"I'll bring that tea," An-wen whispered at length. "And the noodles."

"And people who ought to hear about this," Ying-yi added. "I see several friends by the fence."

She glanced around, gave a vigorous nod, and hurried away.

While Deng-liang was still trying to recover from the impact of memory he found himself at the center of a small but growing crowd, mostly of young people like An-wen and Ying-yi but with a sprinkling of the middle-aged, plus several retired folk senior even to himself. What exactly An-wen had said about him, he couldn't be sure, but it was a fair guess that Sun was much disliked around here. . . .

A shy girl was offering him another cup of *pu-li*. Even before he had set it to his lips two teenage boys were disputing the right to present him with a bowl of noodles. The junior lost but made up for it by proffering chopsticks and a dish of hot sauce. To his surprise he found he was hungry. Eating with all these eyes on him was a new experience but there was no help for it—Ying-yi in particular was beckoning to everyone he recognized, and there were a great many of them. Gradually, as his bowl grew emptier, Deng-liang realized they were staring at him with nothing short of fascination.

But, politely, they waited until he laid down his chopsticks and drained the last of the broth. Then they glanced virtually in unison toward Ying-yi, who seemed not displeased to be at the focus of attention.

"Grandfather, I've told these people what little I know about you. For fear of distorting it in repetition, I humbly request you to recount your own story, and in particular what you know about the man Sun Tian-quan."

Much as he disliked addressing a large audience—and by now so many had gathered, sometimes his frail elderly voice could not carry to its fringes and he had to pause so that his last remarks could be relayed—he could scarcely refuse. He repeated what he had already told his new young friends, with rather more detail because it was plain that was what his listeners wanted. To his amazement, when he came to the part about how his father had scarred young Sun for life, there was a rattle of applause.

Obviously the passage of the years had not made that demon-get more likeable.

After that, though, there was little to add. Following the murder of her husband and the confiscation of her family's large and comfortable home, his mother had died, he was convinced, of a broken heart. As a matter of policy he and his only sister, now lacking any influence that might have kept them together or even in touch, were deported to remote areas of the countryside "to learn from the peasants." Where his sister wound up, he never learned. But there had been much hunger and many epidemics, and death from fever was by no means the worst fate that could befall a pretty girl.

There were grave confirmatory nods.

Brasher than the others, though, trading perhaps on his priority in

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having been the first to spot and talk to this living messenger from the past, Ying-yi said boldly, "Grandfather, tell us the rest. Where have you been since leaving Jiao Can? What have you done with your life? And what happened to your leg?"

An indrawn hiss of breath signaled the crowd's disapproval of the question's bluntness. Deng-liang did not share their reaction. It had been a long while ago, granted, but one of those concerned was still around and—to judge by his involvement with the project to turn Pi Men into a private golf course, not even a park that the public enjoyed access to—prospering in a manner absolutely unbecomingly!

But he had had many years to ponder the essential injustice of the universe.

A buzz of conversation had arisen. He cleared his throat. Instantly the crowd fell quiet.

"The night before my sister and I were to leave Jiao Can, Sun Tian-quan, who as a Red Guard commander of course had special privileges, tracked us down. He boasted that he was going to have my sister assigned to his gang for his personal enjoyment."

This time the hiss of breath was for a different reason.

"I grew very angry. But his cronies knocked me to the ground. As I was lying there he kicked me as hard as he could behind my left knee. Next morning I was forced aboard a train. I had no idea where for. I doubt that anyone did. All the schedules had been disrupted. Our journey took five days. By its end I had gangrene and fever. I was delirious."

There were some among his older listeners who kept nodding, nodding, like porcelain mandarins. One wrinkled woman had unashamed tears coursing down her face.

"When they finally let us leave the train they looked at my documentation. It said I was the son of an enemy of the people and didn't know how to do anything useful. The Red Guard commander in charge of our train, who was nearly as loathsome as Sun, laughed and said all I was fit for was making sausages and he wasn't sure I'd be much good for that."

He paused, prepared for a challenge. But those listening had heard how opponents of the Cultural Revolution were killed and eaten.

"He ordered everybody to go to the places where they were to work. I was left beside the track, with neither food nor water. By this time my leg had swollen to twice its size and turned the most horrible color. It stank, too, bad as a neglected cesspit."

An-wen was leaning forward, eyes and mouth wide with horror, hands upturned as though she wanted to offer help to the unreachable past.

"I didn't even think I was going to die. I was so sick, I didn't know where I was. I didn't know *who* I was."

For a moment the total truth of that statement overwhelmed him. Anwen signaled one of her friends to bring more tea. But he had recovered before it arrived.

"At sundown I was rescued by an elderly man and his younger wife. They carried me to their hut. Having much knowledge of medicine they realized I was in danger of death. The wife's brother was the village butcher. They called him to bring his saws and choppers. He cut off my leg. I was so delirious, I could not feel the pain."

Another of the old women moaned aloud.

"They had had children, a boy and a girl, but both were dead. They took me in like a foundling baby, and in fact I was so weak for almost a year it was much the same thing. As I recovered, I had to accept that I would never be able to work on a farm or do any kind of physical labor. But my rescuer was the village priest—or had been, until the orders came from Beijing to give up superstition. Yet he had medical knowledge too valuable to waste. Witness the way he saved my life."

At the cost of my chance to give life to a future generation. . . .

But otherwise he would have been dead anyway. Forbearing greater detail, Deng-liang drank the fresh tea he had been brought and after a mutter of thanks continued.

"You may imagine I was disillusioned with those 'orders from Beijing.'"

On the instant, prompted by Ying-yi, there was a burst of clapping and a gust of laughter. The old man found his own stiff lips parting in unpracticed imitation. He had had little to laugh about of late.

"Also my rescuers were so generous, I soon came to regard them as parents to whom I owed filial duty. They paid to have a crutch made so that even if I couldn't walk I might at least hobble from place to place." He raised the one he was currently using, his tenth—or was it the eleventh? "The day after, I asked to be instructed in the Tao. Also my adoptive parents were knowledgeable about *qigong* and *fung shui*. When my adoptive father died I had learned almost all they knew. By then things had changed and once again people had come to respect the ancient wisdom. Many times I was told that I ought to re-visit the homeland of my forebears, but I had grown so fond of the lady who was to me as a mother that I delayed until in the fullness of time she joined her own ancestors. Now—here I am."

He still enjoyed his listeners' undivided attention. What else should he add? He pondered a moment, and it came to him.

"I haven't had too bad a life. It shames me, though, that the man who cost me my leg"—then, after the faintest of hesitations, barely noticeable—"and my chance of children, should be flourishing."

"And it shames Jiao Can!" Ying-yi blurted.

In the old days it had not been permissible for the young to raise their voices in the presence of their seniors. Adjusting by degrees, Deng-liang noted that now, on the contrary, his oldest listeners looked relieved, as though this youth had voiced what they would have liked to say but dared not.

After a pause one of the young men squatting on the ground before him made a two-handed gesture that implied taking and twisting. It pantomimed the housewife's way to kill a fowl. At once he could almost smell the paddies of his childhood. The far-off district he had been deported to being too cold for rice, people there ate steamed wheaten buns, *man tou*, and by the same token they raised chickens rather than the ducks that thrived in the muddy canals between the rice-plants.

But he still preferred the quacking birds he had fed as a child. Last night at his boarding-house he had asked for duck webs in soy sauce, only to be loftily informed that nowadays such odds and ends were thrown to beggars.

Of whom there was no shortage here around Tongleng: decent folk lured from the countryside by visions of wealth, or—shamefully often—forced off their farms by developers. The few who had received a fair price were the lucky ones. Ten times as many had been dazzled by the offer of more money than they had handled in their lives, sold up, and learned the hard way on arrival in a city that they could not even afford to rent a room.

And Sun Tian-quan, who had so enthusiastically brandished his Red Book, who had learned the fashionable quotations from Chairman Mao with an infinitely better will than his school work or the training that would have allowed him to follow the trade of his father and grandfather, tailors both—he was a multimillionaire.

As Deng-liang learned from those around him, Sun Tian-quan had sensed that the Cultural Revolution would not last for ever, and determined to feather his nest while he had the chance. In return for allowing “counter-revolutionary” families to stay together, he demanded deeds to buildings and land, so that by the time the political climate reverted more or less to normal, he owned half a dozen farms and houses literally by the streetful. At first he had to be discreet about his wealth, but once yet another shift of official policy made it respectable to be rich, he dropped all pretense and set out to become the largest landowner in the county. Soon he was buying shops and businesses in Tongleng. Deng-liang could not possibly keep track of the interests he was told about: buses and trucks, vegetable wholesaling, consumer durables like refrigerators, radios and televisions, clothing, perfumes and cosmetics. . . . The list seemed never-ending.

And so did Sun Tian-quan's rapacity. Just about everyone in this group

had a story to tell on that subject: whether about how he had sold goods at a loss to drive rivals out of business; or how he had bribed the police to ensure trucks bearing other merchants' produce were delayed on trumped-up charges such as dirty number-plates long enough for their cargo to spoil before reaching market; or how he had threatened the wives and children of his competitors to prevent the others from undercutting his bid for the rights to some desirable new foreign gadget.

"When Japanese developers started looking for someone in this area to buy up land and force the occupiers off it," An-wen said bitterly, "he made sure they got to him first and other people never. They gave him a luxury car. That's how we found out what was going on. He turned up in Jiao Can driving it."

"Badly, too," Ying-yi supplied. "They say he learned to drive a tank in the army. But even tanks take more skill. I know the mechanic who had to fix the dents—in a hurry so that the bastard's precious Japanese chums wouldn't get to hear. Now he employs a chauffeur."

Deng-liang raised a gaunt liver-spotted hand. "He turned up in Jiao Can? Doesn't he live here any more?"

"Oh no." Turning, An-wen pointed toward the city. "See that tower on the skyline, the one with what looks like jade on the roof? Apartments there cost as much for a month as most people earn in a year. He has the penthouse. That costs even more than the others."

"Which is presumably why he doesn't care what becomes of our village," put in an elderly man with bloodshot eyes.

"You're wrong," Ying-yi sighed. "With respect. He cares very much. He plans to make another fortune out of it."

"Quite right, young fellow!" another of the oldsters exclaimed. "And what's to become of us, tell me that? Oh, they've pretended to be fair and reasonable, but what use is two bare rooms two flights up on a city street to people who have raised and eaten their own vegetables, their own rice, their own ducks, and chickens all their lives?"

"But there's nothing we can do about it," the red-eyed one muttered, and it was plain the majority agreed.

There ought to be something . . . But the scale of this offense, that had been going on for years, daunted Deng-liang. The mere sight of that tower where Sun now resided upset him. To think people could so far cut themselves off from the forces of nature, from the currents that shaped the real world . . .

"Hideous, isn't it?" murmured An-wen, noticing the direction of his gaze.

"Yes indeed. That was never designed by a Chinese. Or have we so far forgotten the rules of harmony that our ancestors found out?"

"No, it was designed by an American, they say. There's a lot of American money as well as Japanese pouring into the area. The designer of the golf course is American too."

Deng-liang nodded. "And how do most people feel about what's happening?"

"Oh, they all expect to become as rich as Sun. I don't know how they can delude themselves. At best they may hope to keep a roof over their heads and enough food on the table, and that's if they're lucky. They need to go no further than the center of Tongleng to see what their future much more likely holds."

"But they don't want to," Ying-yi snapped. "They don't want to know that in the midst of this newly rich nation, said to have the fastest growing economy on Earth, beggars are back in hordes such as have not been seen since the evil days of the Kuomintang!"

"While Sun rides around in his big car," An-wen mourned, "and Japanese businessmen get ready to hit balls with sticks across what used to be the graveyard of our ancestors!"

An air of gloom and resignation had become general among the crowd. From its fringes several members began to drift away, especially the younger ones. However, just as Deng-liang was preparing to thank his companions for the information they had shared with him there was a commotion beyond the high wire fence and all heads turned. The policemen, who had been half-drowsing, started to full attention and groped for their holsters, but relaxed again at once. Laughingly pursued by his comrades, here came one of the men licensed to rob and fill in the Pi Men graves at a run over the top of the nearest rise. He was swinging by its brush, heedless of the blood that sprayed from it, the carcass of a half-grown fox-cub that had been clubbed to death. Finding so many strangers staring at him, he came to a clumsy halt and favored the company with a grinful of stained and broken teeth.

"We just found a whole nest of 'em!" he called out. "Killed the lot! There's a bunch of ghosts that won't be troubling your village any more—or what's left of it!" He gave a high crow of mirth. "Any of you fancy fox for supper?" Which saying, he tossed the dead animal over the wire netting.

Catching up, his companions bombarded him with coarse jokes. Three of them carried more dead cubs.

Disgusted by this uncouth fellow, the onlookers exchanged glances and made to disperse. Equally disappointed by their reaction, the fox-killers turned away.

"Wait!"

That was from Deng-liang, struggling to rise. Ying-yi and An-wen



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made haste to set his crutch under his arm. The workers glanced back. What they saw—

No, he couldn't swear to that. All he could certify was what he was trying to make them see: a priest, a monk, someone at any rate party to ancient knowledge whose words were to be taken seriously. And judging by the sudden air of uncertainty that overcame them he must at least partially have succeeded.

"What do you want, old fool?" the snag-toothed one demanded after a pause.

"To warn you that you're wrong." It had come to him in an instant. "Those ghosts—those fox-ghosts."

"What about them?" Superstitious like all their kind, they drew together in a tight cluster. Some of them, not snagtooth, made as if to throw aside the other carcasses but thought twice.

"Or not so much wrong as only half right." He forced himself as erect as possible. "They won't trouble our village."

In the same instant when they were starting to relax and think of making rude jokes about this senile fool, he added, "But they will trouble what you're making out of it. When it isn't ours any longer."

At the edge of hearing he caught a single word from Ying-yi. It could possibly have been, "Brilliant!" An-wen also reacted, clutching her boyfriend's hand in excitement.

"You see, this was the resting-place of our ancestors. We honored them, so they slept well. And none of them grew hungry."

At the mention of hungry ghosts the workmen shuddered visibly. Notoriously, those were the least comfortable of neighbors.

"But once the old families have been displaced"—Deng-liang deliberately used a term the Red Guards had employed, a word with euphemistic overtones of being relocated and reassigned, but transparent to everybody within earshot—"there can of course be no rest and no placation."

He turned away; then, timing the final words precisely, added over his shoulder, "By the way, I understand you work for Sun Tian-quan. Tell him you met an old schoolfellow of his, who lacks one leg. I'm sure he'll know who you mean."

And that was the most he could manage. His final defiant stare at the dirty workmen melted into a swirling veil of grey.

"He has become an ancestor," said Ying-yi in a sober tone that belied his years. Having ascertained that Deng-liang's pulse no longer beat, he had sent friends to notify the policemen beyond the fence. So far they remained torn between this emergency summons and their orders to

stand guard over the bulldozers, but it seemed likely they would compromise by radioing their station. Pending their decision he was taking the risk of inspecting the old man's identity papers.

More literal-minded, An-wen objected, "But he said he had no children because of—"

Ying-yi displayed the page recording his date and place of birth, thumb beside the latter. After a moment she said uncertainly, "Wasn't that—?"

"The site of the Lai Dao temple," Ying-yi cut in. He meant the shrine of the so-called "town god," destroyed in the turmoil of the Maoist era. It had once been the custom that families especially grateful for the blessing of a child, or more often worried because one had entered the world on an inauspicious date, should pay to have its birthplace recorded as the address of the temple; the baby thus became an adopted nephew of the town god, hence a relative of whoever dwelt under the latter's protection. The implications were clear at once, even to these young people.

Huskily An-wen said, "You mean he counts as an ancestor of all of us."

"Correct," Ying-yi said grimly. "And I just figured out how we should do him honor."

Before An-wen could ask what he meant, there came the sound of a police siren and they had hastily to put the papers back. But when he told her later, and some other close friends whose ancestral graves were also being sacrificed to the golf course, not a one among them failed to laugh aloud. One went so far as to say, "Ying-yi, you must incarnate the spirit of the honest judge."

Flattered though he was by this reference to that unique and legendary personage from the story-cycle of *The Water Margin*, the young man preserved a proper show of modesty. But the word spread, and on the heels of the word action followed.

Broadened by years of unashamed indulgence in good living, face permanently reddened by the amount of rice wine and sorghum brandy he consumed, Sun Tian-quan leaned back in the rear of his luxurious Lexus car. It had been a gift from the employers of the man who sat beside him, Mr. Hirata from Tokahara Incorporated of Japan. He himself spoke no Japanese and Hirata only a few polite phrases in *putonghua*, but a young interpreter by the name of Asami rode in the front seat. At the wheel was one of Sun's innumerable young cousins, Li-chang. He was gathering more and more respect for the way he was able to dispense well-paid jobs to his relatives, even quite distant ones, and last New Year he had received presents from almost a hundred people seeking favors from him. He had every reason to feel satisfied with life.

Except that right this moment, when he and his companions risked

being late for the ground-breaking ceremony at the new Pi Men golf-course, which was scheduled to make him a fortune all over again, the Lexus was being slowed to a crawl along this muddy lane that had once been the main street of Jiao Can village, flanked on either side by buildings now reduced to heaps of rubble among which searched listless children, dirty and in rags.

The reason for the delay was obvious. People heading in the same direction. Showing absolutely no intention of stepping aside into puddles to let the car have the best of the road. On the contrary, many seemed to be plodding deliberately in front of it.

Politely though he strove to conceal the fact, it was clear that Mr. Hirata was greatly put out. Which simply wouldn't do. The golf club needed as many Japanese corporate members as possible to make a profit. Sun ordered Li-chang to find out what was happening, and the young man obediently pressed the window switch. The instant the glass slid down, familiar odors entered the air-conditioned vehicle: the sweet cloying fumes of joss-sticks, and the harsher smoke of burning paper.

Li-chang had had a brief exchange with one of those nearby, but Sun had missed what they said, for he had spotted, a short distance off, a man on the staff of one of his many companies, who should have been in his office at this hour of this day. And wasn't that another of his workforce over there? What in the hell was going on?

"They're going to a funeral," Li-chang reported.

So the acrid burning-paper smell came from spirit money. Very well. But no ordinary funeral would attract so many mourners. Even were he himself to drop dead tomorrow, his own extended family would scarcely muster such a turnout. Besides, funeral goods was one of the businesses in which he had established a near-monopoly, and none of his managers had reported any considerable run on stocks.

Which implied—and here a cold ghostly finger seemed to brush his nape—these people must have gone to special trouble to obtain theirs from elsewhere. For the first time in a very long while he entertained the possibility of opposition. . . .

"I gathered that, you fool," he snarled at Li-chang. "Whose?"

"Oh, some old mumbo-jumbo man, apparently," Li-chang said with all the dismissive confidence of a modern thinker. "But we shan't be held up much longer. These people are going no further than Old Temple Square. That's where the stink is coming from."

That square lay only a few hundred meters ahead, as Sun well knew, for he had supervised the looting of the old temple and contrived to squirrel away certain small but valuable relics that he had later been able to sell at a good price. But while Asami was still translating for Mr.

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by Charles Anton

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Hirata's benefit he was half out of his seat with an oath, arm upraised and pointing.

"There, the other side of the road—going the other way! That squalid wretch with bad teeth! Isn't he one of the men we hired to clear old graves? What's he doing out here? He ought to be briefing the 'dozer drivers!"

Hirata intervened, and Asami repeated in Chinese.

"What is more, he and the other despoilers of tombs haven't yet been paid."

And that was indeed a point. Sun sank back, fuming and sweating. "Get us to the golf course as fast as you can," he instructed. "Even if you have to run these devils over!"

Doing his best, Li-chang leaned on the horn and reluctantly people did move aside. However, the square itself, the only part of the village where all the old buildings still stood, was packed with people seeking access to the temporary altars that had been erected, most of them bearing idols from private homes, or to the firetrays on which spirit money might be burned—spirit money, Sun noted grimly, that indeed was not of the color and design provided by his shops, though he had imagined he had that particular trade firmly under his thumb. However, there was no question of making a detour. Demolition of the rest of Jiao Can was well under way and none of the sidestreets was passable by wheeled traffic. Like a boat parting quicksand rather than water they advanced slowly enough to drive the engine temperature gauge into the red zone.

Via Asami, Hirata inquired, "There was once a temple on this site?"

"Yes." Curtly and without enlargement.

"Was this old man a priest here?"

A pause. Li-chang ventured, "I wasn't told he was a priest."

"You called him a mumbo-jumbo man," Asami murmured.

"But not a priest." Li-chang forced a nervous laugh. "*A fung shui* master."

Hirata nodded. "Ah, yes. One has heard of that. The meaning is literally 'of wind and water,' if memory serves. And it has to do with choosing favorable locations for new buildings, gardens and the like. There are frequent references to mythical beings such as dragons. Mr. Sun, I don't recall that you had *fung shui* analyses carried out on the sites whose development we have been discussing."

"I didn't want to waste money on charlatans," was Sun's bluff retort. "After all, who takes that kind of superstition seriously nowadays?"

"Quite a lot of your people, it seems," Hirata countered. "Do I not recall demonstrations against the new airport on the grounds that it entailed lowering a hilltop? Some such phrase as 'harming the leg of the beneficent dragon' comes to mind."

Suddenly Sun was perspiring freely. But they were clear of the square and its milling crowd now, and in sight of the former park where the bulldozers were due to start work this morning. Several people—municipal officials, representatives of other firms both Chinese and foreign having a stake in the venture, policemen, and members of Sun's own staff—were assembled under the sullen gaze of perhaps a hundred mute onlookers.

And on the wire fence, large-character posters that no one had had the courage to tear down. In bold red brush-strokes loomed the warning:

FOX-GHOSTS AND ANCESTRAL SPIRITS HAUNT THIS GROUND

"It seems," Hirata murmured when Asami had translated for him, "the persons previously referred to are not as rare as one might imagine."

"I've had enough of this rubbish!" roared Sun, scrambling out of the car and striding toward the fence with the intention of ripping down the signs. A soft voice delayed him.

"Sun Tian-quan!"

He turned. The speaker was a girl in a traditional robe of red silk, pretty but unusually tall, and teetering as though on bound feet. At her back stood a score or more of young people about the same age, but they seemed to be looking only at Sun, ignoring the girl as though they hadn't noticed her.

"What if I am?" he barked.

"An old friend of yours has returned to Jiao Can. An old friend with only one leg."

She turned and was instantly swallowed up by the group. He stared, but the only clue to what might have become of her was a flash of bright red silk, gone within a heartbeat.

"Sir!" In a near-whimper, Zhou, the assistant who should have supervised preparations for the ground-breaking including erection of a dais, hoisting of flags and a concluding photo-opportunity (and were those not reporters over there, including two with camcorders?). "They won't go beyond the fence."

"Who won't?"

"Any of these people!"

"Because they believe this balderdash about ghosts? I'll show them what I think of ghosts!"

He snatched and shredded the nearest poster, then the next, heedless of the TV cameras trained on him. Eventually, panting, he paused. Hirata, Asami, Li-chang, and the rest were gazing at him with indecipherable expressions. The miserable Zhou had kept up with him. Now he said as though there had been no interval, "No, sir. That's only the workmen. They walked off the job saying they were going to the funeral of

the *fung shui* man and beg forgiveness of his spirit. I—uh—gather you used to know him, by the way.”

An old friend with one leg? Oh, no! An old enemy, more like, if it's who I think. But—oh, it can't be! After so many years!

After so many years to come back for revenge . . . ?

“No, it's the other investors. They fear the loss of their money. The location is not propitious.” The poor man swallowed hard, proffering a paper in shaking hands. Sun recognized it at once. It was of the kind most often used to summarize a *fung shui* evaluation of a project: above all the suitability of a site for its destined purpose. Had he known the lack of such a report would cause this kind of fuss, he could easily have commissioned one, could well have afforded any changes it demanded. But he had been afraid of shaming himself before the Japanese, for who in all of China would have thought of calling for a *fung shui* survey of so non-Chinese a thing as a golf course?

“I'll get one!” Sun blustered. “I'll make all the necessary changes that it calls for!”

“But, sir, you have one already. This is it.”

For a long and dreadful moment he simply stared at the paper. Then he seized it. In large simple modern characters, the only kind he knew how to read, it declared:

WHERE GRAVES HAVE BEEN DESECRATED THERE CAN BE NO GOOD FORTUNE.

And where he would have expected a chop—the square or oblong red-ink stamp affixed like a seal by the person responsible for the document—there was indeed a red mark.

But it was the print of an animal's paw.

Clearly everyone who had been here when he and Hirata arrived must already have seen it. People were turning away. Those who had them were signaling for their cars. Asami said, “It is clear this is a bad choice, if only because your people are so superstitious and disobedient.”

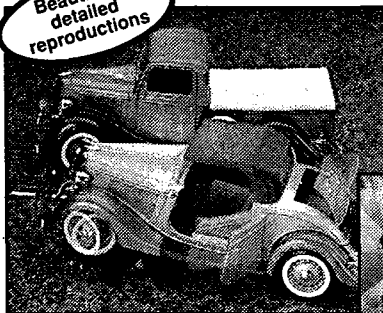
“What?” Sun erupted. But he was only repeating what Mr. Hirata had just told him to say. And Mr. Hirata had caught sight of a Japanese colleague and was walking over to chat with him. Even if he could have heard what was being said Sun could not have understood, but there was no need to translate the way in which they nodded, and nodded, and eventually departed together without a backward glance.

Did the girl in red and her young chums have anything to do with this? More than likely! Furious, Sun swung to face them. They were still there, though at a somewhat greater distance—and on seeing his stare in their direction, drew apart to reveal a figure previously concealed in their midst.

A long coat with loose sleeves. A square black hat, not shiny but dull.

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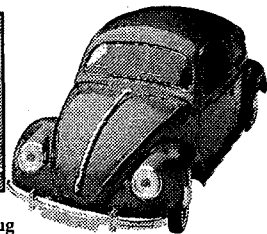
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The traditional garb of a *fung shui* master! And the fellow was leaning on a crutch!

Before he could stop himself, he was charging toward them. Their ranks closed again, then re-parted, with an insulting parody of politeness, to let him through to the center of the group. Halting, breathing in huge painful gasps, he forced out, "Where is he?"

"Where is who, grandfather?" said a young man, contriving to make what was normally a respectful term imply that he was addressing someone who had long outstayed his welcome in the world. Sun's face turned the color of a plum.

"The *fung shui* man, damn you! In the long coat and the square black hat!"

The young man's eyebrows rose. "I didn't see anyone like that," he murmured, adding to his friends, "Did you?"

Vigorous denials.

"You're lying!" howled Sun. "What about the girl in ancient costume, then?"

They all looked politely blank.

"Stop it! You must have seen her! She was wearing red silk! Very pretty!" He was calming a little. "What you could see of her under the paint. Like an actress in the Opera. . . ."

His voice trailed away. They were exchanging looks of understanding. Someone at the back of the little throng said in an awed and disbelieving tone, "Do you think he really saw a fox-ghost?"

A—a what? Oh, NO!

"Well," said the young man who had spoken before, "his graverobbers did find that den and smash the cubs' heads with their spades."

"And boasted about it," someone else confirmed.

"But they weren't local, were they?"—from another, a girl this time. "They wouldn't realize what we recall about the old ways."

Sun stared at her. She gave a slow smile and licked her lips, like a cat tasting the traces of its last kill. Could she possibly—? No, it was absurd. Not only had the girl in red silk been painted like an actress, as he had said, while the face he was staring at was shiny as though freshly washed; she had also been a lot taller. Besides, this one was wearing western clothes, if you could say clothes: the very skimpiest of sleeveless minidresses.

Rudely (but he owed no duty of politeness to these youngsters who seemed set on making mock of him) he thrust between them and stormed back to his car.

At home that evening, having been positively insulting to his latest mistress Ling-li (he had a wife and family but they lived elsewhere)

about the meal she provided, he downed a glassful of Suntory whiskey (there might not be much more where that had come from), lit the latest of too many cigarettes, slumped into a chair in front of a TV set with the sound off, and tried to make sense of the day's events. Barely had he remembered the likely name of the "old friend with one leg" before the phone rang.

"Tell whoever it is to jump in the river!" he roared.

Greatly daring, Ling-li whispered, "But it's Mr. Hong. At the mayor's office."

That was a different matter. Hong was the person responsible for making sure no inconvenient municipal regulations stood in the way of ever-increasing profits for the Sun group of companies . . . in which, naturally, the mayor possessed a substantial holding.

"Mr. Sun," said the nervous voice in the earpiece, "why did you not mention that the site you propose for the new Jiao Can town hall has such bad *fung shui*?"

"What?" He was so astonished he almost dropped the phone. "But it can't have! It's the site of the old Lai Dao temple! It must have good *fung shui* or they wouldn't have built a temple there! Besides, who any longer gives a hoot?"

"The mayor, that's who," hissed Hong.

"What makes him think—?"

"I haven't got much time! A report was delivered here this afternoon. It makes clear that the site may have been all right for a temple in the days of bicycles and buffalo-carts, but the new street-layout is going to change everything. And it all goes back to the loss of the hilltop they leveled when they—"

It had taken Sun that long to gather his wits. "Where did this report come from?" he blasted.

"It was delivered—"

"So you said, but who by?"

"A girl, apparently. Very pretty. Very tall. Dressed in an old-style outfit of red silk and teetering as though on bound feet."

Sun found himself no longer staring at the TV, but through it, as though its mute images masked a deeper reality beyond.

"And who's supposed to have prepared this mysterious report?"

This time there was a long hesitation. Finally Hong said in a near-whimper, "There's no chop on it. But where you would expect one . . ." He had to swallow hard.

"Out with it, you fool!"

"Where you would expect one there is the mark of a fox's pad."

And the phone went dead.

* * *

"I can't help you," said Mr. Wei, who was from Hong Kong. Some in-touch person had informed Zhou that he happened to be visiting relatives in Tongleng and Sun had leapt at the chance of consulting him. There were few local practitioners of *fung shui* left, so much traditional wisdom having been despised during the Cultural Revolution, and those who did remain had declined to advise him. Wei had agreed, though only at a price. This expensive visitor was supposed to be one of the world's greatest experts on the subject, retained even by international banking corporations, though he scarcely looked the part, being thirtyish in a plain grey suit, white shirt, and blue tie. For ten mortal days the reports had turned up all over Tongleng, damning predictions of the misfortune bound to attend the development of Jiao Can unless the whole plan were to be turned through thirty degrees, which would involve altering the course of the river.

And every last one bearing the red-ink mark of a fox's pad.

"But you're my only hope!" Sun pleaded. "Why do you refuse?"

Wei tapped the stack of reports on the near edge of Sun's desk.

"Because in many matters the ancients knew more than we moderns. This is a case in point. We live too remote from wind and water in our concrete skyscrapers. How often do we squelch in the mud of a paddyfield? How often do we witness the sun rise behind an easterly mountain? These analyses were prepared according to a more primitive system than the one I'm trained in, but that's exactly why I'm not prepared to dispute the findings. I'm told, by the way, that an old man returned here recently after spending most of his life in the remote countryside."

Sun almost gasped aloud. How could this stranger possibly know that — without also knowing that the fool was dead?

Apparently oblivious of the impact his words had had, Wei carried on.

"The tradition is a great deal purer in such a simple setting. Much of our modern stuff is based on makeshifts designed to cope with human inventions and particularly foreign ones, rather than the aboriginal forces of nature. Anyhow, removing that hilltop brought about such a fundamental change that no amount of petty tinkering can put things back the way they were."

"Can't anything be done?" Visions of bankruptcy were filling Sun's mind — and memories of the gangsters, the Triads, to whom he had rashly promised so much in return for helping drive Chen families out of Jiao Can. When they came looking for him . . . !

"You need first of all to placate the ancestral spirits whose rest you disturbed. But you don't need a consultant from Hong Kong to be told that. Also, I gather, you are having trouble with a fox-ghost. You're in a most unenviable situation."

"What do I have to do?" Sun moaned, shaken by hearing this sophisticated young man refer to a fox-ghost as casually as to any real person. Wei gave a shrug.

"You could try restoring the graveyard and rebuilding the Lai Dao temple."

"That would take years and cost a fortune!"

"Very probably. But until it's done, or until, of course, you sever all links with the venture, I predict ill-fortune in every enterprise connected with this village you destroyed. Good afternoon. You will receive my account by fax tomorrow."

When Wei had gone Sun put his head in his hands and groaned aloud. His state of mind was in no way improved by two events that followed in rapid succession.

First came a phone call from an extremely polite man—elderly, by the sound of his voice—stating he was sorry to hear about the difficulties Mr. Sun was experiencing but stressing that they must on no account be permitted to delay payment of the fees for services rendered which fell due on the 14th.

Sun's bowels melted. Reference to fourteen often had that effect on people. In full, the name was 14K, that Triad whose aid he had been fool enough to invoke. Desperately he instructed Zhou to make yet one more appeal to the banks and businessmen who until this incredible setback had been happy enough to provide funds and let him take care of the dirty work—in all senses, from moving earth to moving people—in hope of making immense profits without soiling their own hands. Now he might as well have been talking to a stone idol.

And the second alarming event consisted in the arrival of a sealed note, elegantly calligraphed on high-quality paper and once more marked with the fox-pad, which he had to read twice before unraveling the old-style characters. When he finally got their drift he bellowed in such rage that Zhou entered his office at a run, an unheard-of act.

"Look!" Sun screamed. "Read this!"

Puzzled, Zhou complied. "The old man is not in the coffin that they buried."

Lowering the paper, he added, "Can it refer to the one whose funeral caused such a nuisance the other day? If his body really has been stolen, the police—Mr. Sun, are you all right? Mr. Sun!"

"Thank heaven we can get rid of that," An-wen said with a moue as she dropped the ink-smeared and now very smelly fox-pad into the refuse bin and turned back to smile at the friends gathered to celebrate the downfall of Sun Tian-quan, the domino-style collapse of whose companies was making headlines.

"Did you say it was a stroke that did for him?" demanded Mr. Wei. He was indeed from Hong Kong, one of the indispensable cousins every Chinese family relies on, in this case one of Ying-yi's, although he was not really a *fung shui* master, only a successful actor in the island's thriving film industry. As An-wen had said admiringly, he had probably never played a more convincing role.

"Apparently," Ying-yi confirmed. "Not surprising. He ate and drank and womanized too much. Also he had a terrible temper."

"I think," An-wen said firmly as she dropped to her knees beside Ying-yi's chair, "it was fear that finished him."

There were murmurs of agreement.

"Fear of what?"

An-wen spread her hands. "Who can say which frightened him the most? The ancestral spirits? The fox-ghost? The—"

"Just a second!" Wei leaned forward. "I came in late on this, remember. I'm still not clear about exactly what happened. You chanced across this poor old man who'd come home to visit his family's graves after umpty-seven years, and while he was upbraiding some grave-robbers who had also killed a litter of fox-cubs he keeled over. I followed that much. So?"

"So Ying-yi had a minor attack of genius," An-wen chuckled. He looked uncomfortable, but not enough to argue.

"It came clear in a flash. The first thing I did—and frankly at the time even I thought it was pretty pointless—was to ask the old woman who was sneaking off with the fox-cub carcass if she would let me have one of the feet."

"I thought he was out of his mind," An-wen put in.

"Maybe I was. Maybe I was under higher control."

No one was inclined to dispute the possibility.

"Then the whole scheme unfolded like a paper fan. We were able to take advantage of the fact that everyone felt furious about the loss of the park, so lots of people helped with the large-character posters and so on. And then we delivered the first real blow at the ground-breaking ceremony."

"The girl in red," Wei nodded. "But why did he not recognize you? You spoke to him only moments later, didn't you?"

"The girl in red wore makeup like an actress."

"But you often wear makeup—"

"I wiped it off. Also she was much taller than me."

Wei blinked.

"I'm taking a theater course. I have to learn a lot about western styles of acting and dancing. In ballet class I was taught how to go 'up on point.' It not only makes you look taller; it also makes you walk like a woman with bound feet like in the olden days."

Wei whistled softly under his breath. "All right! But where did you get the antique robe?"

"Same place I got my costume," Ying-yi explained. "The wardrobe department at our college. The crutch was old Chen's own, of course." He pulled a rueful face. "Keeping my leg tucked up hurt like fury, by the way. I was glad I didn't have to do it for more than a few minutes at a time."

Wei drew a deep breath. "All right, I follow you so far. This bit, though, only involved duping a thick-headed peasant who might boast about how he'd freed himself from old-type superstition but in fact was still in thrall to it. How in the world did you deceive people who take this kind of thing seriously? You did actually convince a bunch of *fung shui* masters, didn't you? I almost suspect that if Sun had brought a real one from Hong Kong—"

"Just a second," put in one of their student friends. "How did you make Sun imagine he was consulting a real expert?"

"Same way."

"Same way as what?"

"Same way I convinced everybody else." Ying-yi was looking offensively smug, and An-wen told him so. Abashed, he went on.

"It's amazing what you can do nowadays with computers and a color printer . . . I see light dawning at last. Yes, Sun believed a renowned *fung shui* master from Hong Kong was available to assist him because he received a message to that effect via e-mail. By that time he was growing desperate and prepared to snatch at any straw."

"I can vouch for that," Wei said grimly. "I nearly felt sorry for him. Not quite, though. . . . Go on. Was it this miraculous computer of yours that fooled the real *fung shui* men?"

"Of course. I found out through someone else in the computer department about a program available on-line for Chinese people living in countries where if you want a *fung shui* analysis you probably have to do it yourself. You can sometimes get it done for you in America but when it comes to Australia or New Zealand . . . Anyway, one of the goodies about this program is you can set it to operate according to pre-modern principles. When you said to Sun, cousin, that the reports we were circulating were more in touch with the natural world than us moderns, you were telling the exact truth, and there isn't a practitioner in the province who would disagree."

"So they wouldn't take work from Sun, no matter how much he offered to pay," said Wei, marveling.

"Mm-hm. They knew they were up against knowledge deeper than theirs. Of course, if they'd guessed it belonged to a machine . . . But we

took care not to let the printouts be too neat, so the reports looked convincingly hand-inscribed, with the proper kind of minute differences."

"And the fox-pad print was real," An-wen put in with a grimace. "I wound up doing that. Ying-yi was squeamish."

He scowled at her, then grinned, and stroked her hair affectionately. There was a pause.

"So what's going to become of Jiao Can?" Wei asked eventually.

"Oh, there's no getting it back, naturally. But at least it won't be Sun and his Japanese cronies who profit from wrecking it. There are some people in the economics department at the university who have been indignant for a long time about what was going on, and they're setting up an advice service for people conned by Sun who want to start their own businesses. It's not much, but it's better than what we would have had otherwise." He yawned and stretched, then suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Let's go and drink wine in memory of old Deng-liang! Without him, none of this would have happened."

"Good idea," Wei said, also rising. "But—"

"But what?"

"That message about him not being in the coffin they buried."

"Oh!" An-wen laughed. "He's not!"

"What?"

"It's like him having not been born at the temple, though he was. Only his body was in the coffin. The real part of him—"

"Is in us," Ying-yi supplied, and led the group laughing and cheering away. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Next issue, our April issue, is not only one of our immense Double-Length issues, packed to the bursting point with novellas, novelettes, short stories, essays, reviews, poetry, cartoons, letters, and everything else we could possibly fit into it without making the magazine fly apart at the seams, but it is *also* our Eighteenth Anniversary Issue . . . and, in honor of our Eighteenth Anniversary, we are privileged to be able to bring you a very special event indeed, our April cover story, a major new novella by one of the true giants of our field, multiple Nebula- and Hugo-winner **Ursula K. Le Guin**.

Called "A Man of the People," it is related to—although not quite a sequel to—Le Guin's novella "Forgiveness Day," which was published here to wide acclaim last year. "A Man of the People" is another new Hainish story, set

(Continued on page 174)

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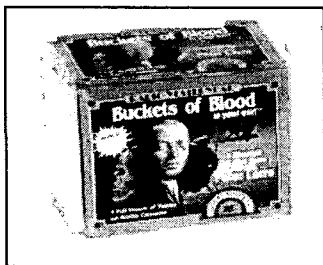
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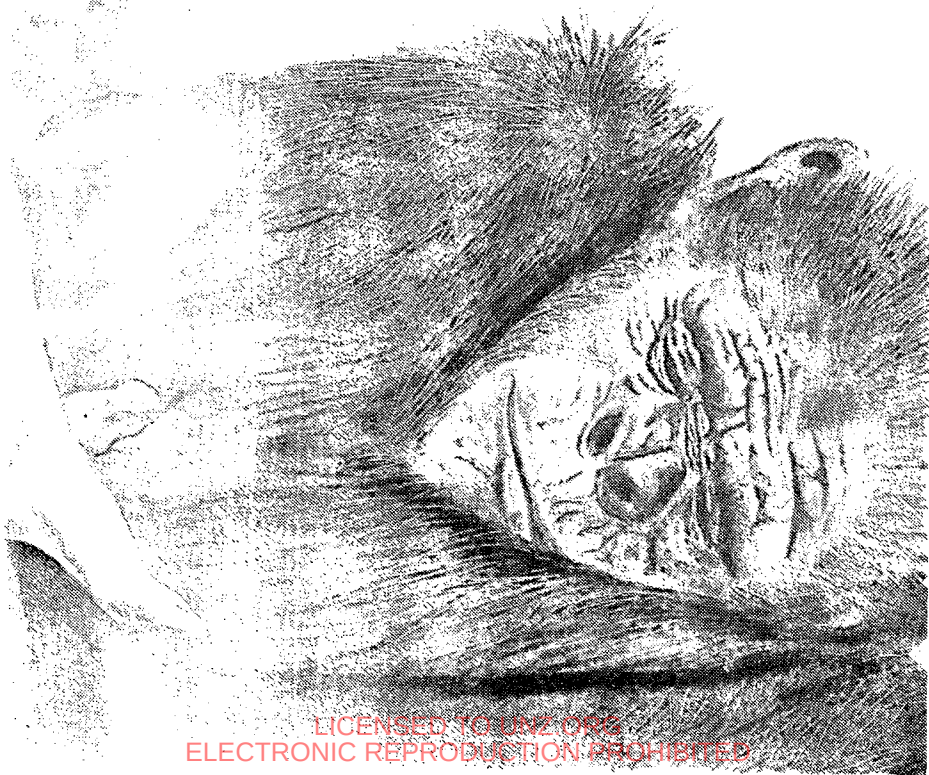
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Robert Reed

DREAMS FROM A SEVERED HEART

In Robert Reed's future of synthetic genes, virtual dreams, and augmented intelligence, a dangerous battle rages for a mystery woman's freedom.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



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Patch-Pu was an ideal clerk: A chimp chassis with synthetic genes, human socialization and a mind augmented with a popular inorganic cerebrum. But Luna was a breeding ground for ideal clerks. Patch-Pu had to settle for working in an unprofitable dream parlor, in an obscure district beneath the Sea of Storms. But he was a consistent, uncomplaining employee, cultivating habits to help maintain his life and sanity. Knowing where he would be in ten minutes and ten weeks was a strength; and the occasional fantasies of change were just fantasies, brilliant but vacuous. And endurable.

Ten minutes from now, he would leave for lunch.

The midday rush had passed, people having bought little dreams for their afternoon naps. The parlor's manager—a computer with AI pretenses—was watching the foot traffic, using algorithms to tell it what the clerk knew by intuition. Patch-Pu deserved rest and a meal. Just thinking of food made his stomach growl, and he touched the sound with a long hand, smiling and looking out the door.

The parlor was set at the bend of a smallish tunnel, between an insurance shop and a beverage stand. From behind the counter, Patch-Pu could see one long stretch of the tunnel. Walking alone, walking in plain view, was a woman. A human woman. Wearing a simple dress, and barefoot. Not an astonishing sight, but noteworthy. Humans passed the parlor every week or two. But youngsters, mostly. Small and curious groups of youngsters. And this one was grown, and by herself, and wasn't that odd?

She would be considered pretty, Patch-Pu knew. But then, looks were a matter of choice with humans. He found himself staring at her vivid red hair, the fine features and her enormous eyes; and she noticed him, her gaze fixing on him, the centers of her eyes redder than her hair.

Patch-Pu blinked and looked away.

Again his stomach growled, the sound hollow and insistent.

It was the manager who whispered, "Goodness," as the human entered the parlor, walking past the stone counter, feet scarcely making noise on the polished floor. She paused where panels of various sizes and heights displayed what was new and popular. Adventurous dreams; romantic dreams; ten-night epics and two-minute delights. Lifting a pale hand, she touched one of the panels. It was like watching an adult fumble with a child's toy, her reading instructions that a seasoned browser knew by instinct. Then she paused, giving a sigh. The hand dropped, and she turned toward the counter, smiled and asked with a stiff tired voice, "How much memory do you have?"

She meant the parlor's memory, and Patch-Pu told her. Then he asked, "May I be of assistance?"

The question seemed to go unheard. The smile hardened into a tight

sneer, then changed again, her expression impossible to read. Again she sighed. Again she touched the panel. The clerk thought she appeared fatigued, unlikely as that seemed. She was selecting a category, then some specific dream. Just what kind, Patch-Pu couldn't tell. Bright colors; a sense of motion; then a privacy screen activated. What would interest a human? They didn't sleep or dream anymore, their lives too rich to interrupt with either simple pleasure . . . he had heard that a thousand times, at least—

“Go to lunch,” said the manger.

Early. A few minutes early, and Patch-Pu looked around the parlor. The aisles were empty, the last customers gone. Not out of respect for the human; and certainly not out of any fear. But probably because it was just so odd to have her here. And as long as she remained, nobody was likely to buy as much as a nap's dream.

“Hurry back,” the manager added. It disliked being left alone with the public, inventory and accounting its strengths. “The late-day rush is going to be strong, I predict.”

Patch-Pu stepped from behind the counter. The human glanced over her shoulder, for an instant, her expression strange. Complex, shifting. He noticed that one of her hands was between displays, palm against the crystal white wall. Wanting to speak, he could think of nothing to say. He took a breath and held it until he was walking in the tunnel, unable to not think about her. Why was she here? A creature smarter than him by any measure . . . what could she want? And where did he get the impression that she was in some kind of pain?

A right turn led to a larger, more prosperous tunnel, then a broad vertical shaft lined with elevators and ladder vines. Stored sunlight flooded the shaft, hot against fur and the green of the vines made vivid. Forty levels of tiny apartments were above him, then the lunar surface: Vacuum and hard radiation and little else. Three levels below was a plaza, restaurants and restrooms and tables set among weedy succulents. The climb down was easy, almost unconscious. Patch-Pu bought his usual fruit bowl and a platter of cultured meat, the meat strung on plastic bones and a stylized plastic sculpture meant to resemble a baby antelope's skull. He joined the other clerks at the long central table, making conversation as required. No one spoke of the human. His companions worked in the other tunnels that radiated in all directions. He thought of mentioning her, then hesitated, wondering if he would even be believed.

Humans were peculiar, unknowable apes. Augmented like everyone, but more so. They lived as scholars and scientists, each one expert in many fields. It was said that the wealthiest of them were augmented to

where they could dip into the Net at will, the sum total of mammalian knowledge within easy reach, their powers verging on the godly.

Someday, it was said, chimps and their ilk would inherit the same glorious skills.

Once humans made the next evolutionary leap.

Sometimes Patch-Pu wondered how it felt to live that way. He was doing it when a homely sasquatch woman arrived at the table, her platter full of buttered ants and a chimp sitting in her seat. "Aren't you late?" she asked. "Why aren't you back at work?"

Because he'd lost track of time; he realized. Patch-Pu shot up the ladders, almost running to the dream parlor; yet the manager was neither angry nor apparently aware of his lapse. "A good lunch?" it asked. As always. Never at ease with small talk, yet programmed to keep making the clumsy attempt.

There was a usual mixture of browsers, Patch-Pu noticed. Every kind of chassis and citizens of more muddled heritage. But no humans, and he asked, "When did she leave?"

"Who?"

"The red-haired woman," he replied. "Did she stay long?"

A pause, then it said, "Not long, no."

"Did she buy anything?"

"Why would she?" the manager asked, baffled by the question.

Indeed, why would she? Patch-Pu began to circulate, asking people if they needed help. Were they looking for a specific dream? Would they like suggestions? His inorganic cerebrum, tissue-thin and laid over his own brain, contained his years of experience. Regular customers sought Patch-Pu's advice. They trusted his instincts. Dream industries were vast and sophisticated, products for every taste; what wasn't in the parlor's memory, they could order from the Net. With a modest surcharge, of course.

But no, the customers didn't need help just now.

Patch-Pu ended up at the back wall, tidying up the various dream paraphernalia that were displayed on hooks and little shelves. Nobody was there, but something was odd. Wrong. An odor made him turn. A pile of something was near the storeroom door, on the floor and almost hidden. Patch-Pu approached, paused and bent low, his weight on his knuckles and his nose sniffing once, then again. It was some kind of ash, he realized. With the long fingers of one hand, he touched the ash, finding something buried. Something hard and whole. And without once breathing, he pulled free the white and porous and nearly incinerated remains of someone's long leg bone.

* * *

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"Nothing happened," the manager maintained. "Wouldn't I have seen someone being burned alive?"

Patch-Pu had to nod. The manager had a dozen eyes, most of the parlor visible to it.

"But I remember some children," it continued. "Chimp children. They were back there. They might have made the mess . . . as a joke, I suppose. . . ."

"What kind of joke is a leg bone?"

"Do I know about humor?"

In other circumstances, that would have made the clerk laugh.

Then the manager said, "Dump the mess. Do it now."

He shook his head. "We should tell someone—"

"About the children? They did no harm."

"About the red-haired woman," Patch-Pu insisted. "I think something was wrong with her."

"How can you know?"

He couldn't know. It was intuition, that's all.

"Besides, she left. I can remember her leaving." A cold pause, then it said, "Use the custodian. Clean up, please."

Which he did, little choice in the matter. He took the custodian from the little storeroom, then he put it away again. And the manager nagged, "Please help our customers. I can't manage all of them by myself."

The late-day rush was steady and more involved than the rush at midday. People wanted long intricate dreams that would last all night. Sleep was a wonderful retreat, a chance to travel and learn, and grow. One chimpish student needed to become familiar with Tau Ceti, and he bought several dreams that would make him a pedestrian on both colony worlds. An orang woman wanted to raise novel fruits from seed, and Patch-Pu steered her to a popular teaching dream where a master gardener would go through the lessons step-by-step, her own subconscious lending the gardener a face, voice and presence. Then came an old man, feeble even in the lunar gravity: A gibbon's chassis with a human-style face. He wanted a long beautiful dream with scenes from the ancient earth. "For someone dying," he explained without fear. "For their last sleep." And for an hour, without pause, Patch-Pu helped him select images of lush fern forests and cold white glaciers, synthesized by computers and married to appropriate music, the old man paying him a substantial tip in gratitude.

Patch-Pu kept thinking of the ashes and bone. Was there any connection with the human? But how could there be?

"Sir? Can you help me, sir?"

Lifting his gaze, he saw a chimpish woman struggling with one of the front displays. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I broke it, I'm afraid."

She hadn't, no. It was the same display that the human had played with, and for no reason it had been left engaged, the screen blank but a pulsating red circle showing in one corner. He touched the circle, unsure what it meant; and suddenly he had retrieved what the human might have last seen, his eyes squinting—

"Oh, my!" squealed the woman.

—at a pornographic image. Almost clinical in detail, and bizarre. The participants were human, startling naked and captured at the instant of climax. Rigid jets of semen clung to three . . . no, four penises. Oversized members, one man owning two of them. Special reservoirs of false blood inflated them during coitus . . . at least that's what some apes did . . . and his gaze dropped, the image pivoting and growing as if to intrigue him. They sold quite a few sex dreams in the parlor, but with human subjects? That seemed unlikely. A single woman lay on her back, in that forest of men, modest breasts and a narrow strong belly, skin pale as parchment, and the face . . . that he knew at a glance. . . .

"I don't think so," said the chimpish woman. And she reached for the CLEAR button, her arm grasped by the wrist and Patch-Pu jerking it back again, his thick voice saying:

"Not yet. Wait."

She shrank back, a little startled.

A file number was on display, almost invisible. Patch-Pu squinted, committing it to memory and offering no apology. The manager grumbled, "Mr. Pu? Is there a problem?" But the clerk didn't hear the voice, leaning closer, that image still pivoting and the red-haired woman coming closer now, looking out at him with crimson eyes bright and damp, and scared, something in the face implying some considerable pain.

With a single fingertip, he touched the panel. The face.

And the image dissolved, leaving Patch-Pu squinting at a bottomless gray nothing.

Normal life held few appeals for modern humans. Which was part of why the other apes had been augmented, it was said. The apes began as servants and clever pets and reminders of humanity's primitive roots. In the end, they became a kind of cultural reservoir, living in ways that humans had mastered before them. Honorable work. Deserved sleep. Civil order, and the occasional spice of crime too.

Sometimes it seemed as if the new people were better at life than the humans had been. Like Patch-Pu, they took pride in their jobs, feeling no great bitterness toward others. Clerks might wish for larger apartments or better salaries, but their daydreams stayed ordinary. Chimps didn't envy humans, nor even think about them with any regularity.

That's what made it strange, Patch-Pu sitting alone in his tiny apartment, an inducer net draped over his head. He was accessing the parlor's files—he had a direct, permanent linkage—and for the first time in many years, he was preparing to dream about humans.

Sleep came with a word, that silky slow dissolve into darkness. A presence met him at the brink, asking what he wanted. To participate, or simply watch?

"Watch," said Patch-Pu. "Unseen."

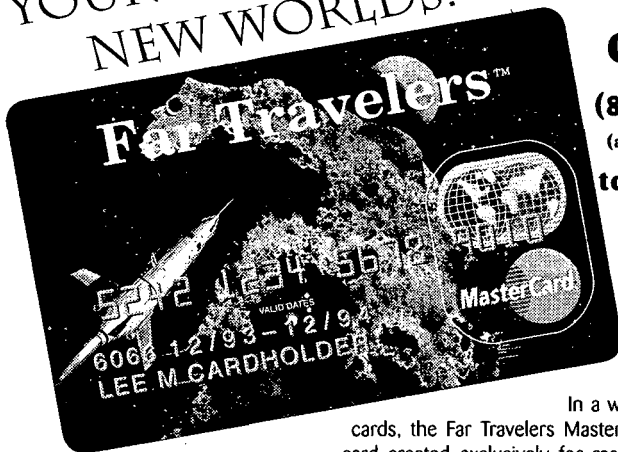
And he found himself standing beneath an opaque dome, its floor covered with colorful water-filled pillows, curtains of shaped smoke creating porous little rooms. Music played. Odd music, sharp and complex and impossible to enjoy. Voices rose, fell. Bodies appeared, seemingly sprouting out from the pillowed floor. Tall narrow humans. Men and women and mixtures of the two. And there was sex, as promised. Standard types; inventive types. Some acts bizarre. Never the prude, nonetheless the clerk was embarrassed by much of what he witnessed. The ugliness of the human body made it worse and made it better. Erotic scenes, yet distant. Passionate, yet not to him. They weren't his species, furless and breasted and ridiculously bipedal. And eventually his disgust turned into simple boredom, Patch-Pu nearly quitting his tour of this orgy. He began to wake himself, pausing to concentrate and hearing a voice, husky and close. Plaintive. *Gone*.

On knuckles and shoes, he passed through a thick curtain of perfumed smoke. A man was on top of a woman—a red-haired woman—and the man was talking, not thrusting. Saying, "Because you'll do it. Because." A muscled broad back and rump and strong hamstrings, Patch-Pu noted. And no trace of hair anywhere on his body or head. The man said, "Midge," and grasped the woman's jaw with one big hand. Then, "It's decided, Midge," and he flung her head hard into one of the watery pillows. The gesture was both violent and harmless. Red hair bounced. She made no sound, her expression both fearless and mortified. She watched the man rise to his feet and turn, Patch-Pu staring at him too: A smooth pale blister of a head; a broad chest and belly; and a tattooed groin made to resemble a second face, monstrous and open-mouthed, the hairless penis serving as a kind of elaborate, oversized tongue.

Patch-Pu blinked, gasped. He looked at the genuine face again. Like the woman—*Midge*—the man had bright red eyes. But everything about him, including the eyes, looked cold and dead. A hint of bleak amusement showed on the mouth, for an instant; then the man walked past him, and the clerk turned his attentions to poor Midge.

It was the same woman, he was sure. She lay there with a hand against the side of her face, forgotten, and the other hand between her legs, positioned as if to protect. Patch-Pu dropped low, weight on his knuckles,

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face to her face. For an instant, she seemed ready to weep or scream, her whole self shuddering; but then she was calm again, impassive and immune, her face like some badly rendered mask meant only to hide whatever she was thinking.

There were motions, sounds.

Patch-Pu rose again, peering through smoke curtains, seeing the rest of the humans closing on them. Shoulder-to-shoulder, they formed a circle, whispering among themselves with a respectful excitement, no one dressed and the men variously aroused, tattooed flesh glowing as the skin was pulled taut.

Heart racing, Patch-Pu found himself waiting too.

The man's voice came from directly behind him. "Go on now. There she is." A coaching tone, stern yet encouraging. "See? She wants you." A pause, then he said, "Don't you, Midge."

The woman acted as if she were waking from a deep sleep, a slow but compliant stretch as she stirred, hands grasping the closest pillow and her smooth rump lifting, pointed at the clerk and whomever was behind him. Whomever the red-eyed man meant when he said, "Go to it, lover. She belongs to you."

Patch-Pu tried to move out of the way, and couldn't.

He felt the newcomer walking into his body, then both of them walking together, as one, and he was the lover. Naked; aroused. He still wore a chimp chassis that moved on knuckles and toes. He found himself staring at Midge's rump, part of him wishing that she had the colorful swollen vulva that made chimp women irresistible . . . and the red-eyed man was asking, "Midge? What do you want from him, darling?"

She arched her back, breathed and said, "Everything?"

Wake up, Patch-Pu told himself. *Now*.

The audience seemed to close on them, liquid murmurs mixing with the smoke; and the man growled, "Help him. Inspire him, darling."

On four limbs, Patch-Pu covered her without touching her, like a table set over a foot stool. He couldn't wake himself, but for a long moment he could resist, muscles quivering from the exertion. Midge dropped her shoulders and reached behind herself, one hand touching the long stiff hairs on his thigh, grabbing hold and pulling until he flinched. Then she reached higher and began to stroke him, making tiny flat moaning sounds. And Patch-Pu kept resisting, and succeeding, the audience beginning to grumble and the red-eyed man snapping at them. "Give her time," he warned. "Try and show patience, will you?"

Midge twisted her head, the red centers of her eyes finding the clerk's face. And she said, "Help me," with fury. "Do this." As if he was at fault here. "For me, do this."

Patch-Pu shut his eyes and thought of chimpish women, damp candy-colored vulvas and fragrant clean fur and powerful long backs that could hold any man; and there came the watery sound of applause as he entered the woman; and he woke as he climaxed, astonished to find himself back in his tiny apartment, embarrassed and a little lost, and ashamed to have abandoned Midge to her mortal enemies.

"I like sports," said a voice. Tiny, shrill. "I like playing in my sleep. All kinds of sports."

Patch-Pu looked up, blinking as he shifted his focus. It was early morning, not an hour into his shift, and he had been reading the intricate guidelines to the parlor's workings. Capacity. Coordination. And limitations. He hadn't glanced at this mishmash since his first year here, no need to understand the system's guts. As if he could comprehend them—

"Are you going to help me?"

A gibbon chassis, and young. And spoiled, Patch-Pu sensed at a glance, stepping from behind the stone counter and asking, "What's your favorite game?"

"Freefall slugger ball," said the adolescent.

He wanted to be the hero, Patch-Pu knew without asking. He led the customer to one of the panels permanently linked to sporting dreams, calling up several classics of the genre. But the gibbon said, "Not those. I know them. Show me something new."

New meant novel, and nothing was easier. The parlor's crystal walls contained millions of dreams, most of which had never been accessed, and why not give the boy something obscure? Something ancient? "Slugger ball," said Patch-Pu, "began as a different game. Humans played in it on the earth. The first augmented apes had their own leagues—"

"Yeah?" A doubting look.

"—and you can play in our first championship series." He made a rapid, cursory search of the records. "Or you can play against the humans. There were exhibition games as long as the humans could win."

"Play humans?" A perplexed look. "Why?"

"Or anyone. Anyone you want."

"Show me stuff," he said grudgingly.

The panel disgorged bits and pieces of dreams. There was a fuzziness to them, a sense of age and a technology in its infancy. Patch-Pu was about to access one file, but a motion caught his attention. Someone else had entered the parlor. A sideways glance, and he froze, astonished and then frightened, then some part of him oddly unimpressed. *Of course he comes here*, he thought. The red-eyed man, hairless as stone, was standing before the counter, his head turning from side to side, speaking to

the manager in a voice too soft for the clerk to hear. *He came looking for Midge.*

"What are you doing?"

Patch-Pu blinked, turning again. "Pardon?"

"You're supposed to help me find some dreams."

He hesitated, then said, "Browse for yourself," and walked away. If the adolescent spoke, Patch-Pu didn't hear him. He was struggling to appear normal, to seem at ease. He paused to pick up a bit of trash, then wandered toward the counter, aware of his breathing and aware of the human's eyes. The smooth face was grave and thoroughly unimpressed. He seemed disgusted with the entire parlor, no one speaking for a few moments. Then the manager remarked, "My clerk might have noticed. Shall I ask him?"

"Ask him," the human responded.

The same voice as last night. The same cold face.

"This gentleman," said the manager, "is looking for a lady—"

"—this tall." A broad strong hand lay level in the air. "Human. Hair red enough to burn your eyes. Probably wearing a dress. Plus these eyes." He pointed at himself, waited a beat, then said, "She's my sister."

The clerk almost shivered, then decided that the man was lying.

"We're worried about her," said the man. "She has problems. Medical problems. She's not at all well."

"Have you seen her?" asked the manager.

What . . . ?

"I told him," it said, "that she hasn't been here."

It was a second shock, hearing the manager lie. Or had someone wiped away its memory?

"No," Patch-Pu muttered. "Not in here."

"But you leave," the manager continued. "We know she hasn't been in here, but maybe you've seen her elsewhere. Have you?"

The clerk shook his head, pretending to think back.

The red eyes grew tired of watching him, studying the parlor again. More slowly this time.

"I haven't seen her, no." Patch-Pu glided forward as the eyes began to drop, and he blanked the reader at the last instant. Did it look suspicious? But a dense page of language about the parlor's memory would be incriminating, he sensed. "A human woman?" He tried to sound dubious. "No, I don't recall her. Sorry."

"We're scared for her," the man elaborated. "She is sick. Poor augmentation has made her mad, if you want to know."

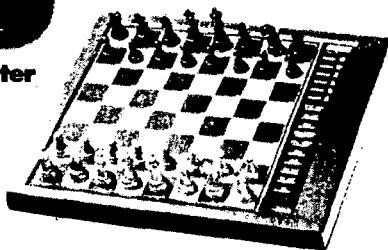
Patch-Pu wanted to believe him. Perhaps last night's dream was a symptom of some bizarre human insanity. It was an appealing thought, the alternative infinitely more horrible.

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The human glanced at the blanked screen, sighed and lifted his gaze. Then he sighed again, bored with his surroundings. A snarl, and he said, "Help me. There's a reward if you do."

With resolve, Patch-Pu told him, "Sorry. I haven't seen her."

"That's funny." The slick face lost the snarl, halfway smiling. "One or two of your neighbors remember her. From yesterday. One clerk swears she saw a red-haired woman come in here—"

"No," said the clerk. A tight, angry voice.

"—but sure, she might have lied. You're right." The smile was charitable. "For the money, sure."

No one spoke for a long moment.

Then the human touched the reader screen, a discharge moving from his thick fingers. Synthetic neurons of some kind? A melding with the parlor's machinery? "Now you know where to contact me," he told them. "In case you do see her, I mean."

"We will," the manager promised. "If we have news, we will."

Patch-Pu asked, "What's her name?"

A wink, and the man said, "Midge," as he stepped back from the counter. "And I'm Urz."

Then the manager said, "Urz? Perhaps you'd like to purchase something from us."

"A dream?" The smile became genuine, almost radiant. "Why the fuck would I?"

Patch-Pu read until his eyes ached, learning nothing definitive. Yes, there was ample extra capacity in the parlor's walls. The place had been built in better times, its owners planning for success. But what he suspected seemed to be impossible, even ludicrous. Nothing in the literature hinted that such things could be done. But then again, the literature was as old as him. And wasn't it possible that humans had learned new magic in the meantime?

He looked about his apartment, considering sleep. Just sleep, no dreams but the ones he made for himself. But Patch-Pu remembered how he had left Midge last night, feeling guilt even if it had been a dream. That's why he slipped the inducer net over his head, again accessing the proper file, readying himself for the orgy—

—only it wasn't. Everything had been changed. Whatever this dream was, it could encompass more than one time. He found himself standing inside an enormous dome. Someone's residence, no doubt. The dome was transparent, the raw lunar surface just meters away. Soft warm furniture brushed against his leg. He paused, picking up a carved wooden face. Here he was flesh-and-blood, no choice given to him. He could speak, saying, "Hello?" He waited, then said it again. And someone touched him

from behind, touched him on the shoulder, Patch-Pu jerking around and lifting both arms, fur rising off his body in alarm.

"We have to hurry," said Midge, her voice low. Unhurried. "He isn't here, but he watches."

"You mean Urz?" said Patch-Pu. Except it wasn't his voice.

"Hold me," she whispered.

And it wasn't his body. He was inside a human's skin, his hairless arms around Midge, feeling her with too-small hands. She was wearing the dress that she had worn in the parlor. Slick and perfumed. This was the recent past, he sensed. He looked up at the blue face of the earth, then asked, "Shouldn't we start?" with his new voice.

"You're shaking," Midge observed.

Trembling, yes. And his heart pounded out of fear.

She opened his shirt and stroked the dark hairless chest with both hands, then kissed his sternum and his heart, working to smile before she looked up at him. "I can't thank you. Not enough."

"Let's go," he insisted.

"First," she said, "do you have it?"

He didn't know what she meant, but his hands knew. They pulled tiny gloves from a pocket, and Midge took them and put them on. A silver light grew on her hands, then fell away again. He didn't know what he had given her, but he heard himself saying, "Be careful." He told her, "They're not guaranteed, even if they cost a fortune." His fortune, he knew. He had purchased an experimental technology for Midge, and he loved her, and she had asked him to help her escape from Urz, and he loved her enough to take any risk. He had lost his fortune and his good sense, and he was thrilled to be rid of both impediments.

"Hurry," Midge coached. "Let's go."

They ran, the bipedal gait odd and normal at the same time. And he remembered how he had met this woman, replaying events with a dream's smooth sensible transitions. Urz was a near-legend among humans, particularly young ones. A self-proclaimed throwback, Urz believed in primitive pleasures done with a stylish flair. "We're apes with thinking caps," he would roar. "We can't hide the apes forever! It's a sacrilege, and it's a waste!"

Urz made a considerable living with his wicked parties. His customers were entirely human, expert in many intellectual fields and able to enter the Net at will; yet curious too, and adventurous, and bored. Urz promised blood sports and unique sexual partners. He had a cadre of employees, Midge included. She was the center of activity when the clerk's character had met her. No more beautiful than other humans, her attraction was her vulnerability. Her status as a possession. She held that most ancient and demeaning role: Slave.

She was given to every man, every woman. And Patch-Pu's character watched, waiting his turn, feeling sorrow for her and horror with everyone's actions, those emotions mixing with his base excitement, leaving him susceptible to love.

Finally, at the end of the evening, his name had been called, nobody left to displace him. Midge was exhausted, filthy and stinking and surely in pain. Yet she saw everything at a glance, reading his young face and managing a smile, then pulling him close with both hands, crying without sound and those fierce crimson eyes blinking, her whispering voice saying, "Help me?" Whispering, "You have to help. Please, please? Will you?"

The possession had gained a possession of her own. In an instant, and all it took was a look and some tears and the words. And now Patch-Pu's dream shifted again, Midge beside him and them beneath her fancy prison cell. A thick doorway had been propped open on his way inside. More expensive tricks had gone into subverting the lookouts and alarms, he realized. She saw the gap and charged it, through and out of sight, Patch-Pu trying to catch her, suddenly terrified that she might vanish for good.

But she was waiting, doing slow high leaps of joy. They were in an empty public tunnel, and Midge turned and asked, "Did you get the other thing?" She held out one hand, a residue of the silvery light showing. "You said you'd try to find one."

What thing? He thought.

But again his hands knew, reaching into a deep pocket and pulling out a small heavy device. A weapon. Illegal and deadly, with a simple handle and trigger and just two settings. Deadly, and more deadly. He didn't want to give it to her, believing it was his duty to serve as her personal armed guard; but she snapped it away, avoiding his reach afterward, making a low delighted sound as she passed the weapon from one silver hand to the other and back again.

"Careful," he advised.

Midge switched it to the lesser setting.

He touched the woman's shoulder, saying, "Let's hurry. I can take you anywhere, pick a place—"

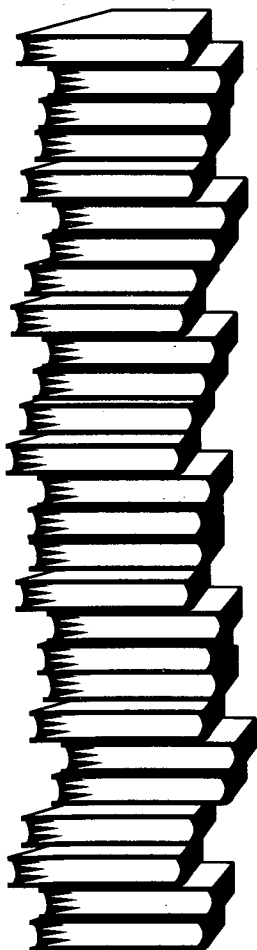
"No," she said. "He'll just follow me."

Of course Urz would follow. That was self-evident. "But if we're together, and we help each other—"

"No," she interrupted again. Louder this time.

Patch-Pu's character had a superior mind, augmented and intricate; but he was little more than a child in experience and attitudes. Only very slowly, in dribbles, did the truth seep into him. And even then he

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tried to plead, saying, "I helped you escape. I gave you everything you needed. What have I done wrong?"

"I'm grateful, lover. I am." She straightened her back, never tall but standing as tall people will. "You don't understand. Grateful doesn't mean that I have to do the wrong thing. The wrong thing would be for you to go with me, because he's going to chase me. I'm worth too much. And if you're with me, love, he could very well kill—"

"No," he muttered.

"Yes." She swallowed, sighed. "I don't want that to happen."

"You're not leaving me!" Panic made him grab her, hands on her shoulders and him starting to shake her as he lifted her—

—and she shot him, the beam vaporizing the toes of his right foot and causing the stone floor to melt. To bubble. He fell backward, and she caught herself and stepped away, lifting her dress and changing the weapon's setting again. Making it even more dangerous. A crude holster of cloth was wrapped around her thigh. Patch-Pu stared at the thigh and her hands, all of them apparently bare. The new gloves had merged with her flesh, he knew. What was their talent? But suddenly he was Patch-Pu again, lying on his back and his chimp foot ruined, the pain of it muted by surprise and the neatness of the wound.

"Stay out of Urz's way," Midge advised.

Who was she speaking to now? Patch-Pu, or the human?

"Trust me," she said. "I'm not worth compassion."

Then he heard the sound of her running, and the pain began in earnest, Patch-Pu climbing onto his three good limbs and screaming after her. Even when he was awake again he was screaming, roaring at the world, bodily lifting his furniture over his head and flinging it against the walls, shattering everything, splinters and gelatinous goo strewn everywhere.

Years of tidy, quiet existence had been obliterated.

And in the sudden calm afterward, he heard distant screams. His neighbors, all clerks, were demanding peace and quiet. Or should they call the police?

Patch-Pu went to work in the morning.

A conspiracy of normalcy seemed to be in effect. Nothing remarkable happened. The midday rush was heavy; lunch was welcomed. Patch-Pu was sitting at the usual table, licking clean the false antelope skull, and suddenly he became aware of a silence, thorough and peculiar. He looked at the others, discovering that they were looking straight above. At what? he thought. He couldn't decide what he was seeing. A point; a sloppy square. Sometimes children threw kites into the tall shaft. But this object was falling too fast, wasn't it? Forty-plus stories of acceleration. Part of

him wished he could calculate its mass from its apparent speed—a human being could do it easily, unconsciously—and suddenly everyone was moving, as if on a signal. People rose and backed away, some pulling at Patch-Pu, screaming for him to get out of there.

The impact was sudden. Violent. Final. A cube of dense metal slammed into the table, upending it and partially crushing it, food and plates splattered across the plaza. Then silence, just as sudden. Just as loud. And Patch-Pu picked himself up, a few soft astonished screams coming from bystanders, everyone moving closer. He climbed over the upended table, his eyes focusing on a short length of metal rope, one end fused to the metal cube and the other tightly woven around the broken neck of a young human male.

A glance overhead, a shallow panicked breath.

Then Patch-Pu climbed closer, pulling debris from the body, grabbing the right leg and lifting it, some kind of elaborate bandage in place of a shoe.

"She did shoot him," he whispered. "She did."

"What did you say?" asked one of the clerks.

"Nothing."

"Leave him alone," said another one. "Don't even touch him."

Patch-Pu allowed himself to be pulled away. A pair of security robots announced that the plaza was closed until further notice. The person would receive care. All was in control.

"There's nothing to care for," the first clerk muttered.

Patch-Pu wanted to cry.

"And I barely started my lunch," someone grouched.

He made for the ladder vines, climbing three floors in a hand-over-hand motion. Only afterward did he wonder if someone might have been watching from above. Perhaps the boy had been dropped as a test, someone eager to see who would react . . . unless they already knew *who*, nothing meant by this terrible show except to give him fair warning.

Next to the beverage stand was a bench, long and hard and occupied by an enormous sasquatch man. When Patch-Pu arrived at the dream parlor, the sasquatch made eye contact, gave a little nod, then grinned to himself. Twenty minutes later, when the clerk looked again, two sasquatch men were sharing the bench, sipping steaming coffee from identical bowl-sized cups.

The manager seemed unusually reticent. It didn't invent work for Patch-Pu, even after the afternoon rush. Nor did it try small talk. A regular customer arrived in the early evening—a gorilla chassis; a voracious dreamer—and began to talk about the plaza and the excitement. "The boy killed himself," he claimed. "I have a source. They say he broke

into an apartment up where the shaft narrows, then flung himself off the balcony."

"Why?" Patch-Pu had to ask.

"Humans," the customer growled. "They're prone to suicides. Didn't you know?"

The clerk shrugged; the manager was silent.

"They're too augmented, I think." The gorilla's head shook, its expression both sad and superior. "They've locked too much of their souls into those fancy, phony parts."

Like any good clerk, Patch-Pu made neutral sounds.

The customer bought several long dreams, each one sent to his apartment ahead of him; and he left with a wave, hurrying to get home and fall asleep as soon as possible.

It was ten minutes before closing time.

The manager waited for a moment, then asked, "Would you like to leave early?"

It was the manager's voice, and it wasn't. Leaving early was against every rule, and that's when Patch-Pu became certain. With a soft, almost inaudible voice, he said, "Midge?"

Nothing.

Trying to appear at ease, he strolled into the tunnel. The long bench was empty, but standing near the tunnel's mouth were three sasquatch men, tall and massive, and watchful. They were dressed in conservative attire . . . a detail that unnerved him for some reason. Patch-Pu stared at them for a moment. One of them made a comment, a joke, the others laughing loudly enough to be heard. But they didn't approach, no need to hurry. Patch-Pu stepped back into the parlor, and without warning, he pushed the manual override on the door, closing it and physically locking it, then stepping back from the heavy tempered glass.

"No," said the manager. *Midge*.

"Call Security," he responded. "Do it now."

Silence.

He moved to the counter and tried to call out. But every connection between the parlor and the Net had been severed. "Who did it? Them?"

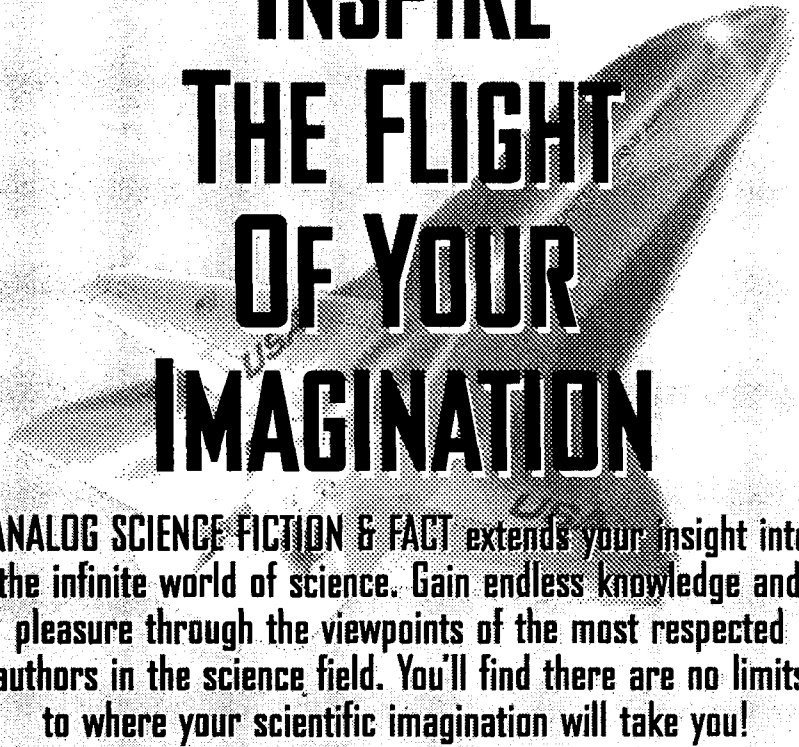
"Me." The voice had changed. Not Midge, not the manager. But somewhere between. "Security and the police are useless, Patch-Pu."

"We need help," he muttered to himself.

And Midge said, "Trust me. They cannot help."

He didn't doubt that. What next? He went to the door again, manually turning off every light; and while he stood there, an instant after the parlor was dark, one of the sasquatch men stepped into view, beside him and towering, one vast hand pressing against the glass and heavy teeth showing in the smile.

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The clerk backed away, praying he was invisible.

"You aren't supposed to defend me," said Midge. "Did I ask you for help?"

"Didn't you?" he responded. What could he use as a weapon?

"I warned you. I told you not to help me."

He shook his head. "Except you left that file open. You practically let me discover you—"

"No, no," she argued. "I had to leave it open. Pour yourself into a bottle sometime, then try sealing its cap. It can't be done."

"The boy gave you those gloves—"

"—that interfaced with my augmentation. That allowed me to merge with your parlor's memory. And I extinguished my body afterward—"

Burned herself to ash, she meant.

"—and assumed one of your customers would clear the display."

Patch-Pu couldn't argue about the technical parts. It was the rest of it that bothered him. "Why here?"

"To hide, naturally."

He glanced at the sasquatch. The shops and parlors along the tunnel were closing, and now the sasquatch was watching them, his back to the door. Not a concern in the world. "You should have gone into the Net."

"The Net's public ground, and open. Urz would find me."

"He found you here," he reminded her.

Silence.

The sasquatch stepped out of view.

Patch-Pu shook his head, asking, "Who didn't see you? You were walking in plain sight. Nobody saw you leave here. And then you lied, or you made the manager lie."

"And you," she reminded him.

"Both of us, and Urz saw through everything."

"I made a mistake, Patch-Pu."

He found a metal bar back in the storeroom. Holding it in both hands, he took a few experimental swings.

"Go home," Midge advised him.

He couldn't see anyone in the tunnel.

"Go home and dream." A pause. "What kinds of dreams do you like?"

The tunnel lights were being cut back, people abandoning the district for the night.

"They don't want you. They want me."

Vents opened in the floor, a portion of the air sucked away. Every sealed shop lost a portion of its air until morning, the oxygen rented to populated places. What was left was thin but breathable, and dry. It made Patch-Pu gasp, him wondering who would be more impaired. A chimp or the sasquatches?

"Why do this, Patch-Pu?"

He didn't answer. Instead he asked, "Were you prepared to stay in here forever, Midge?"

"Maybe so."

"How could you escape?" He thought for a moment, then said, "Cloning your body . . . I suppose you could . . . if you had friends to help, and the resources—"

"Perhaps you're right," she allowed.

"The boy is dead," he said.

And she said, "I know. I'm sorry." A pause. "I warned him not to get too close."

"You shot his toes off."

"I should have removed more than the toes."

Another swing of the metal bar, the thin air giving a low *whoosh*.

"Why are you here, Patch-Pu?"

He moved to the counter and sat on top. All the years behind it, and he had never gotten up on it this way.

"Why?" Midge persisted.

"Because," he said, "I work for this parlor. You're part of it." He paused, swallowing with a dry throat. "Good clerks defend their shops. That's why."

She said nothing, the silence doubting him.

And he took a little swing, thinking how useless it felt. Against three sasquatches? Professionals?

"You're just a loyal employee," she said with a mocking tone. "Is that all?"

That, he thought, and because his entire life had been spent doing nothing of substance. Foolish or not, this might be his only chance. Being the hero in a dream was what? A firing of neurons and a memory. Not enough heat generated to set anything ablaze. Glancing at the back wall, he thought of the dream paraphernalia hanging in the darkness. He asked himself how it would feel to be a hero. An authentic hero. And suddenly, without warning, he knew what he could do, his breath racing as he leaped off the counter, setting straight to work.

The sasquatches convinced the lock to open, a slight dry *clink* and the seal broken, air whistling into the store as they entered and they shut the door after them. No alarms were activated. They didn't turn on the lights. In their work, it was good to have eyes that reached into the infrared. Where was that clerk? Not behind the counter, nor in any of the first aisles. Chimps were strong and possessed tempers, no amount of tailoring able to erase their natures. If this wasn't a public place, they would have brought weapons. A crazy chimp! One of them ended up at

the back, opening the storeroom door with a certain professional caution. A simple job, and he didn't want trouble. And he smiled, finding the clerk huddling in the corner of the tiny room, almost whimpering.

"Please don't hurt me," Patch-Pu begged.

The sasquatch laughed and said, "Not much, I won't." He stepped forward, and some kind of snare or net fell on his head. He kept laughing, both hands reaching at the irritant. And the inducer net was activated—a topflight model; the parlor's best—and he was asleep in an instant, melting to the floor.

Patch-Pu rose, watching him.

The other men came and asked, "What? What are you doing?"

Then the first sasquatch was dreaming, finding himself on an ancient battlefield, enemy soldiers sweeping toward his position. He was asleep, but the inducer had been doctored. Its motor-denial functions were inoperative. The sasquatch rose to his feet, shouted a curse in a dead language, then charged his enemies, a ten meter cord playing out and the others taken by surprise. Huge bony fists struck their faces, their bellies. One sasquatch went down, beaten unconscious; then the other managed a sucker punch, dropping the sleepwalker and reaching for the net—

—and Patch-Pu struck him with the metal bar, on the meat of a shoulder, then an arm. A clean white rage had him focused, strong. The sasquatch dropped back, roared and charged. And missed him. Patch-Pu spun and struck one of the long legs, shattering a kneecap, then a femur, leaving him helpless and writhing in agony.

Panting, the clerk stood over him.

Defiant.

Victorious.

He hadn't regained his breath when someone touched him from behind, causing him to flinch and turn. Urz was watching, almost smiling. His face was illuminated by his bright hands. "Clever," was the human's verdict. Patch-Pu managed to lift his weapon again. Then one of the glowing hands rolled, palm up and a tiny device discharging itself. The stink of ozone; a crack of thunder. And the clerk was thrown into the display panels behind him, plastic and glass shattering, ribs and the backbone absorbing the impact, ten million years of falling from trees preparing him to survive the blow.

Down. Limp. But alive.

"Let's drop him," said one voice. Close. Pain mingling with anger.

But Urz said, "Leave him alone," and continued with his work. Patch-Pu squinted, making out the hairless man with brilliant hands flat against the parlor's wall. A blue-white light filled the room. He looked

like some god whose mission was to hold that wall upright, legs apart, his stance athletic. Almost heroic.

"Drop him like we did the boy," said a sasquatch. "Or kill him some other way."

"Help your friends," Urz replied. "Get out of here."

Silence.

Urz glared at someone. "He isn't going to hurt us. How can he? He's a fucking clerk!"

Motion; a low moan. Patch-Pu heard the parlor door open, then close again. Then he seemed to lose consciousness, coming awake with the stink of cologne in his nose. Urz? Kneeling over him, yes. Saying, "You won't cause trouble, will you?" A pause, then he added, "Because you know there's no way you can, can you? Because I won't let you."

"What did you do with Midge?"

"Sent her home, of course." A grin as he stood. "I've already got a mold filled with totipotent cells. A forced cloning. Expensive, but she'll be back on line in a few months."

Patch-Pu tried to stand and couldn't.

"Do you know what I'll tell her? The first thing?"

The clerk breathed and asked, "What?"

" 'Next time,' I'll say, 'find yourself better champions.' "

Patch-Pu couldn't agree more.

The parlor's owners sent someone to measure the damage and file official complaints with the authorities. The thieves' motives were left undetermined. For his defense of their property, Patch-Pu was awarded an extra week's salary and time to heal; and for the next six months, without complaint, he continued working, holding to most of his established routines. But he stopped eating his lunch from false antelope bones. He stopped sitting with the other clerks. And sometimes, at irregular intervals, he returned late from lunch, the manager having grown accustomed to his lapses, knowing better than to make constructive comments.

One afternoon, late from lunch, Patch-Pu strolled into the parlor, paused and gave a little start. A human woman was waiting, hair black and the face wide and the big eyes golden . . . but no doubt as to who she was. He said, "Midge," and held his distance. For an instant, he wondered where Urz was lurking.

But nobody else was in the parlor. And the manager was silent.

"Thank you," said Midge. "For all of your help."

"What did I do?" he interrupted.

She said, "Everything. More than I could have hoped."

He didn't understand.

She stepped closer, always tiny. "Of course you're confused." Touching his arm, she said, "But think. If it's possible to pour yourself into a parlor's walls, then why not pour yourself into two places? Why not give each place half of yourself?"

"Half? How?"

"One part in plain view, one part hidden."

"Did you escape again?" he asked.

"This part wasn't recaptured." A pause, delight showing on her face. "The part Urz took home? It's only a portion of the original Midge. I tried to give her all of our endurance and tenacity, to help her survive—"

"Where were you?" he sputtered.

"Ask yourself, Patch-Pu. Why would I limit myself to you and the boy? With all the men in this world, why the two of you?"

Someone else at the orgy? He felt an unexpected jealousy, asking her, "Who is he?"

But she shook her head. "I shouldn't tell you this much."

Half of Midge here, and half elsewhere. Maybe after she escaped from the boy, but before she came here . . . a rendezvous? With her other champion? He had taken a less enduring, less tenacious part of Midge, and some cells to begin the forced cloning that made this body. The face and eyes and hair had been changed, the half became a whole, and their subterfuge had worked.

"I just wanted to thank you," she told him. "And I'm pleased that you're healthy, after everything."

Patch-Pu had unwittingly helped in their subterfuge. He had defended what he thought was all of her, and he had failed. And Urz had every expectation met, going home with what he had sought in the first place.

"Let me give you something, Patch-Pu. For your sacrifice."

What did he want?

"Would you like to own this dream parlor? Perhaps?"

What astonished him was how he reacted to the words. He was neither happy or angry. Own the parlor? He found himself looking at it, trying to judge his essential desires—

—and he shook his head, saying, "Nothing, thank you. No."

"I have the means now," she promised.

He didn't doubt it. He didn't care, asking her, "How can you leave part of yourself with Urz?"

If anything, she acted angry. A roll of the golden eyes, and she said, "It's the best that I could do. It is."

The clerk breathed, then said, "Let me walk you partway home. That's what you can do for me."

As they left, the manager asked, "Where are you going, Patch-Pu?"

He didn't answer, nor even look back. They walked to the green shaft;

and for an instant, with amazing clarity, he imagined throwing Midge out into the bright air of the shaft, watching her fall. But why blame her? he found himself wondering. If what she said was true, if she lacked endurance and tenacity, then she was just the weaker half of Midge, and pitiable. So instead he took her hand and shook it, then said, "Good luck. Good-bye."

She retreated to an elevator, giving her destination with a touch of her small pale hand.

Then he was walking back to the parlor, knowing what he would do. He would need money and access to the Net, both of which the parlor afforded him. But he wasn't a clerk anymore; he was a freshly born hero who needed to learn about security systems and human culture. Somewhere above, somewhere on the Sea of Storms, a tough little ape was suffering, which meant he couldn't wait another minute.

He began to run, on knuckles and toes.

Pedestrians scattered.

And he gave out a loud long hoot, the sound of it echoing down the stone tunnel, then back again. ●

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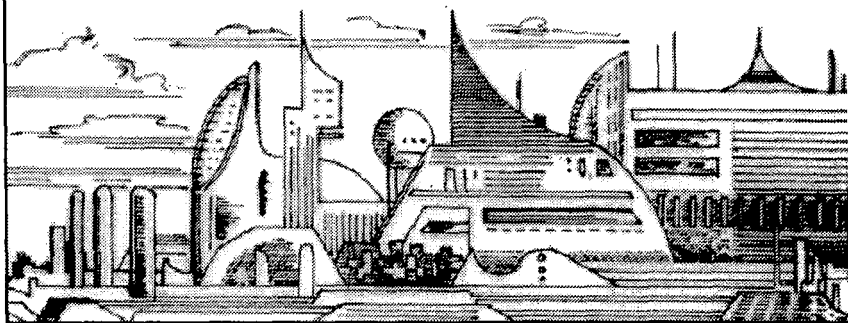
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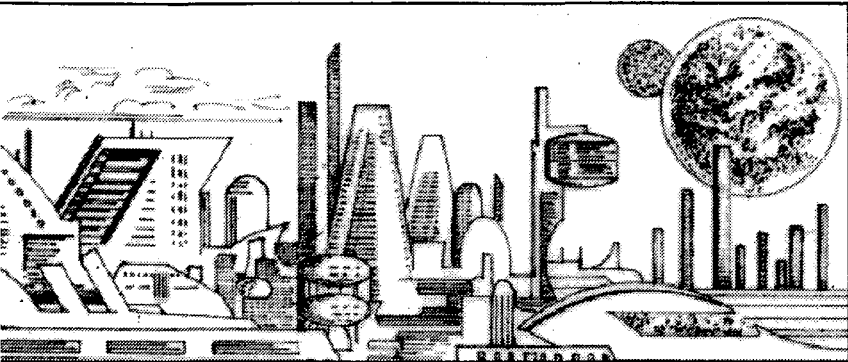


FUTURE PRESENT: A LESSON IN EXPECTATION

Bruce Boston

The future the past once envisioned is
nothing like the present we now inhabit.
No aerocars. No globed and spired metropoli.
No eccentric rube-goldbergian gadgets that
deliver a cold drink and a shiatsu massage
with the casual flick of a single switch.
No passage to the stars or even Mars.

And what of those gently purring walkways
lightly peopled by superior beings who glow
with the logic of a sublime moral grace?



Instead the present through which we slog
and stagger seems raw and tatterdemalion
as the past we expected to trash behind
—the twentieth is the cruelest century—
breeding sex plagues out of ignorance,
rife with demagogues and despoilation.

And while we ponder what roads not taken
have abandoned us to this frantic moment,
this vain dyspepsia of the modern mind
—no one answer, a gross on every side—
the tomorrow we envision is omnivorous:
mushrooming clouds, displacing populations,
devouring civilization with toxic fungal rains.

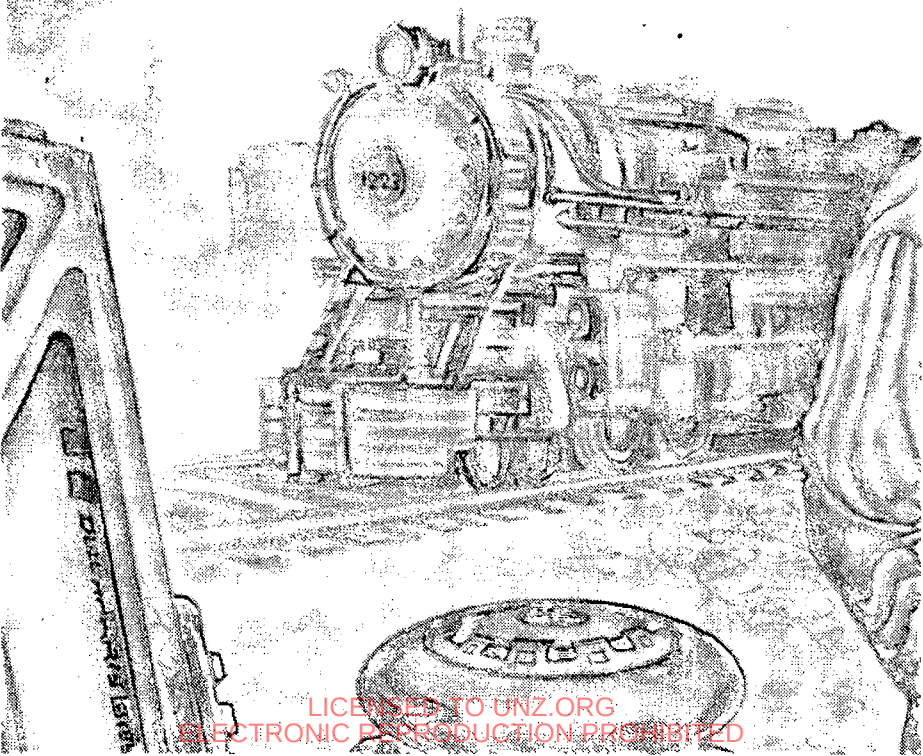
As those purring walkways recede and fade
into the dimming distance of the mind's eye,
the future, second by ever-rivering second,
oblivious to all expectation, yanks us bodily
into the coagulating rapids of its own design.

David Redd

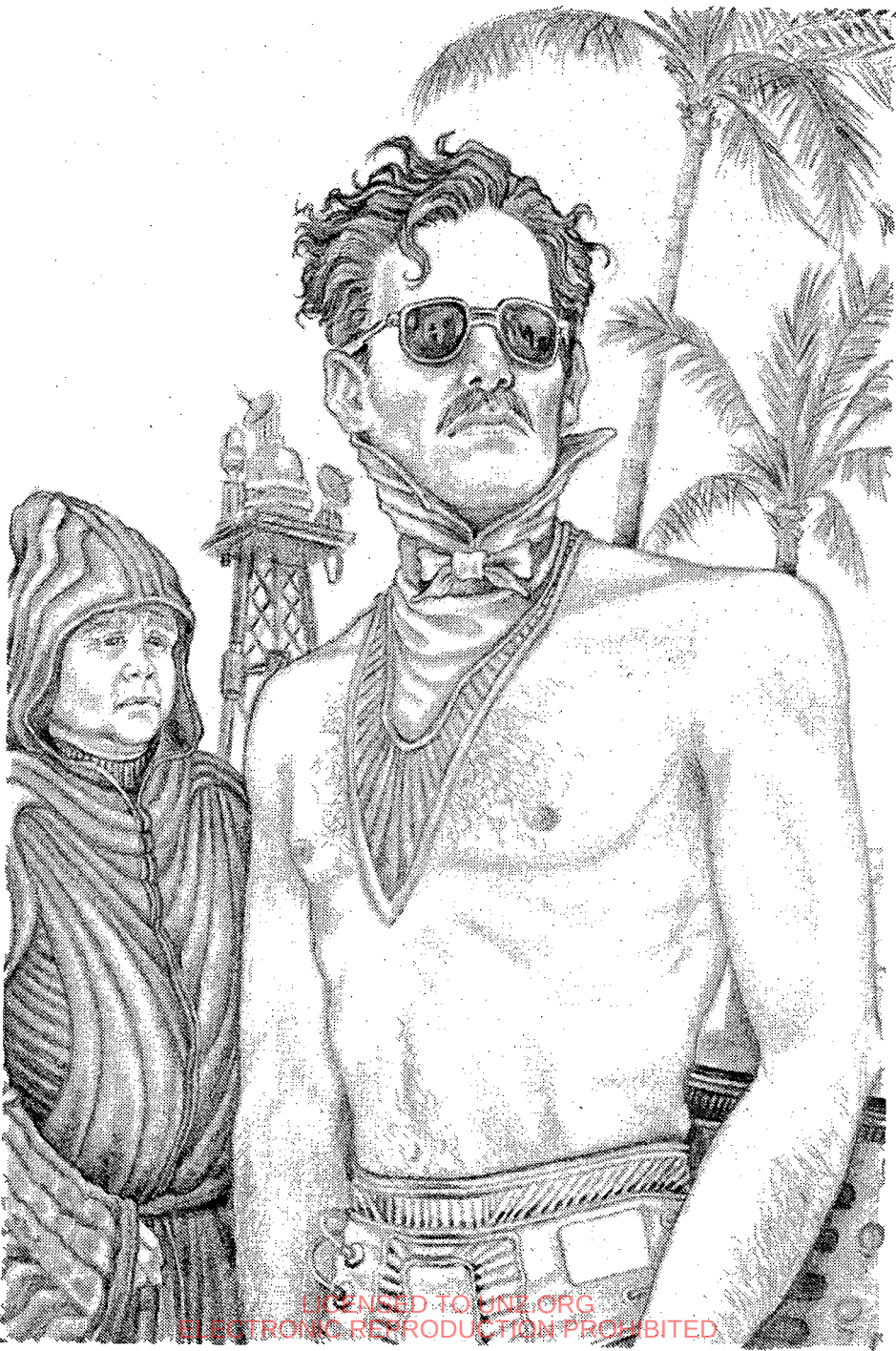
TROUT FISHING IN LEYTONSTONE

David Redd is a civil engineer living and working in Wales. His short stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *The Gate*, *Scheherazade*, and *Interzone*. "Trout Fishing in Leytonstone" was written in homage to the Richard Brautigan fans and new music freaks who flourished in that area during the 1980s.

Illustration by Dell Harris



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Word reached Leytonstone that the Emm Dee himself would visit town today, under cover of the annual festival, and would secretly inspect their Public Implements Exchange Hall. An official inspection was the greatest threat imaginable to the rural peace of twenty-third century England. So, very early that morning, a dozen cleaners in purple bodysuits came dancing into the hall, singing fresh words to their traditional cleaning song:

**The Emm Dee's coming!
The Emm Dee's coming!
Gotta clean this place up!
Gotta clean this place up!
The Emm Dee's coming!**

Swiftly, the cleaners twirled around, dusting and polishing the displays. Hammers. Kettles. Lawngrazers and other typical domestic biosynths awaiting loan to the townsfolk. Around them, the building metabolism warbled cheerful backing music as the tidying-up went on.

Suddenly, a hand brushed aside the white heat-filter membrane from the doorway, and in strutted the manager of the Exchange Hall, wearing a freshly dispensed pneumatic grey suit instead of his usual fluorescent shorts.

He beamed approvingly at the busy cleaners. "Nice going, you guys. This'll wow the Emm Dee when he comes!"

The manager's speech was somewhat formal and archaic, as befitted a person of his importance.

"Say," he went on, "I brung you some help!"

A second man had followed the manager in. He was short and plump, dressed in a purple Cleaner Fourth Class bodysuit with a temporary wrist-patch. The building recorded his bio traces automatically, as it did for all new recruits to its staff.

Finally, a third man came through, in dazzling white, a man whose chromosome signature was very familiar to the building. Instantly, its music gave a drum-roll of welcome.

The third man was Billy Troutfisher!

Yes! The poet! It was he! Leytonstone's favorite son, the same Billy Troutfisher whose sunglasses-and-moustache logo was projected from holocubes all over England!

The cleaners gasped with delight. Temporarily, they forgot the threatened visitation from the Emm Dee. Billy Troutfisher was the most notorious poet in town! He was no more a mere fisher of trout than a certain earlier English writer had been a shaker of spears.

The little man in purple joined the other cleaners, but the manager and Billy paused to speak. The building listened interestedly.

"Say, Cousin Billy, it's good of you to come and help us polish the lathes and stuff this morning. I know how busy you must be with the annual poetry festival starting this afternoon!"

The poet shook his head. "It's no trouble to help a relative with a little light cleaning."

"You're too modest about your ablutionary abilities, Cousin Billy! Your special knack with polishing will make all the difference! My boys and girls here are good, but even they'll admit nobody else can give my lathes that extra Troutfisher sparkle the way you can! So, thanks again!"

The manager, Billy's Cousin Mortimer, had fallen into poetic diction himself from sheer gratitude.

The building played applause effects for a full five seconds. Then Mortimer departed, to reprogram his office molecules into more auditable configurations.

Billy Troutfisher went over to the displays, dustrag and vorticiser in hand. He had first polished the lathes as a small boy, earning some Junior Disposable Income after unplugging from school. The cleaning skills learned then had never left him. In a strange atavistic way, he almost enjoyed an occasional return to the relaxation of manual labor, after months of unrelenting hard work composing poetry.

He adjusted his vortex polisher settings for the first lathe, which had already received a preliminary dustsucking from the tubby little man in front of him. The vorticiser hummed steadily. The brown superhogany material of the lathe was transformed from mere cleanliness into absolute shining radiance! It glowed! Slowly and carefully, Billy performed the same miracle on the next piece of apparatus, and the next. Soon the whole row was gleaming!

From the machinery shone out the aura of power and majesty so familiar from Billy's poetry, so widely experienced in festivals and holocube projections, so often injected directly into the bloodstream by art-lovers. Every lathe now glowed like some living being genespliced with diamonds!

The little man glanced admiringly at Billy.

"May I say, Mr. Troutfisher, as a new visitor to your lovely old town of Leytonstone, how honored I am to find myself working with you this morning? Sir, your cleaning is as exquisite and unforgettable as your justly renowned Performance Poetry!"

But to this compliment, Billy merely gave a modest cough.

"Please, good friend, do not mention my poetry. Not here."

His tones were gentle, yet the curt rebuff in them—so unlike the true Billy Troutfisher—was unmistakable.

The little man seemed to shrink away sadly, and returned to his cleaning in silence. So did Billy.

The great cleanup went on, with some indefinable spirit missing, yet competently enough. Dishwashers had their fur trimmed, chisels were fed, lasers were lined up in size order, molds for gnomecasting were discreetly hidden. The work was getting done, but through it all something seemed amiss.

The music became muted.

The gopher cages were still.

And the choruses from the other cleaners faded away.

Everyone could see that Billy Troutfisher was not his usual self. Even with the few townsfolk who came in, borrowing household necessities for the day, Billy merely exchanged the briefest of polite greetings while continuing his cleaning. Business was light today, as most people had abandoned their normal activities and gone to Leytonstone House to set up their tents or stalls for the annual Free Festival of Leytonstone Culture. Within the hall, the atmosphere became tense and worried. Finally the little man used his privileged position as a newcomer to speak up again to Billy.

"Excuse me, sir. I know I'm just a visitor, just ordinary little old Samuel Sadsack from Mile End, but I can't help noticing something wrong, sir. May I take the liberty of inquiring . . . ?"

"No, Mr. Sadsack, you need not inquire. Nothing is wrong."

But the small plump man was more persistent than his literary cast of speech might have indicated.

"Sir, the very force of your denial convinces me that you must have something weighty on your mind. Can't I help you, sir? After seeing your poetry cubes, I feel I know you so well that we are surely not strangers! Call me Sam, sir. I'm your friend."

This impassioned declaration of support brought a faint smile to Billy's lips, his first all morning. The other cleaners feigned concentration on their polishing as they bent their ears closer; the building metabolism surreptitiously turned up the amplification.

"You're very kind, Sam."

Billy's tones sounded more normal at last.

"And you're right. I *do* have something on my mind, Sam. Troubles. One big trouble for a poet, anyway."

He paused, then lowered his voice still further.

"Sam, the truth is this. *I have developed writer's block!*"

This totally unexpected admission, so astonishingly frank and personal as to be almost middle class in its crudity, sent a gasp of amazement around the entire Exchange Hall. An Englishman had to be

desperate indeed to reveal his innermost emotions to anyone other than a bartender.

"Oh, that's awful! You mean, sir, you can't write poems any more?"

"Exactly," said Billy. "There, it's out. You know, Sam, I can't tell you how glad I am to confess my sad condition to someone at last."

Billy stared around the hall with tragic unseeing eyes. The other cleaners looked away hastily and pretended absorption in their work, as he continued:

"Yes, my friend, I haven't composed a poem for six months. Much longer like this, and I . . ." Billy hesitated. "I'll end up having to *work* for a living."

"No! Not *that*, sir!"

"I'm afraid so, Sam."

It was the fate every true English gentleman had struggled to avoid for the last two thousand years.

If he couldn't produce a new poem *this very day* . . .

Samuel Sadsack looked deeply shocked, as well he might.

"This is dreadful news indeed, sir. But—But why are you not preparing your existing poems at least, for the Leytonstone Free Festival? You should not be here! The recitals will commence in a few hours!" Sam became agitated. "Sir! Why is the supreme master of Machine Relic poetry toiling at this menial task of dusting and polishing, worthy though it is, instead of going out to seek fresh inspiration?"

"Because . . . because I'm a twit."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

Billy explained. He wanted the Emm Dee to be really impressed by, the appearance of the Exchange Hall. Because if the so-called surprise inspection went well, Billy's Cousin Mortimer would be rewarded with rapid promotion within The Firm . . .

"So I just had to pitch in and do what I could—he's my cousin, after all. My own little problem didn't matter. I *had* to help him. And in Machine Age times," Billy concluded, "a person like me was called a twit."

Sam Sadsack stood open-mouthed in sheer worship.

"How incredibly noble of you, sir! How selfless! Sir, you have a heart of gold!"

"Not me," said Billy. "I've never had it transmuted." He shrugged. "My girlfriend has, though, Miss Sally Samantha Trueheart. She had it changed when she made 'Heart of Gold' her intro song."

Sam's eyes widened at those last words.

"Intro song?"

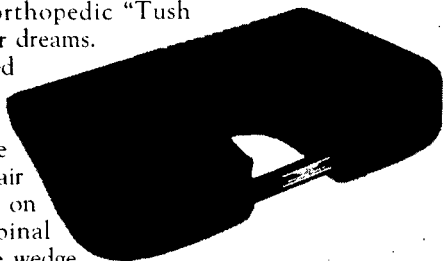
Billy winced. Plainly, he realized he had erred in mentioning anything connected with poetry. Sam was already raising his hands in obvious

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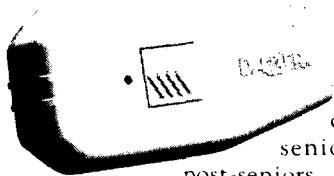
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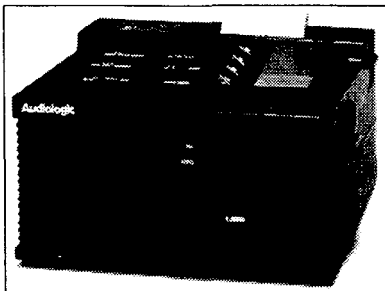
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excitement, lathes and dusting long since forgotten. The music swelled optimistically as the building noticed the sudden change in mood.

"An intro song, sir? Why, *that's* what you need now! Sing me your intro song, the one you always do at the start of a poetry session! Who knows, it might put you in the mood for composing again!"

"It wouldn't."

"It might! Please! Sing it for me now, Mr. Troutfisher!"

"I couldn't, Sam. Not in public. Not since my writer's block."

But the cleaners and the one or two early customers listening with them were already shouting encouragement in their typically English fashion, "Sing it, Billy!" and "Let's hear it for the fat guy!" and "Here we go! Here we go! Here we go!" How could any sensitive soul refuse their entreaties?

Billy Troutfisher could not refuse.

"I'll do it. Just this once."

Sam gasped with delight, his open-mouthed countenance resembling the Great Gulping Guppy which all English schoolchildren created in their first-year biology.

Billy set his wristband to audio generation mode. The music fell silent, knowing its place. A brisk chugging noise replaced it, the familiar Machine Age rhythm of his backing loop. Musical accompaniments had always been thought essential by English poets, except during a few tedious centuries when speech alone had been fashionable.

Billy let the beat cue him in.

Momentarily, his expression seemed easy and natural again.

He sang out:

Trout fishing in Leytonstone—

That's where I wanna be!

Trout fishing in Leytonstone—

You can come along with me!

Trout fishing in Leytonstone—

In Leytonstone!

Where the green grass grows

And the stream still flows

To the sea!

In Leytonstone,

In Leytonstone!

These evocative lyrics were hailed by a burst of wild clapping and cheering from his listeners, especially the building, which always appreciated patriotic verses.

Billy breathed in. He shook his head a little dazedly; this was his nearest approach to a public performance in many months.

Sam was almost jumping up and down in ecstasy. "Oh, that was wonderful, sir! Absolute genius! The authentic Billy Troutfisher! Oh, you *will* find your voice again sir, you *will*!"

But Billy could only sigh.

"I wish I could believe that, Sam."

And he resumed work on the lathes.

For the rest of the morning, Billy continued his cleaning and polishing in silence. His dilemma was plain to all. If Billy could not produce a new poem for the festival today, he might as well abandon his art and sell himself into the vilest menial serfdom as a Tax Exemption Certificator.

Yet in Sam he had found a source of fresh encouragement, it seemed. With Sam's help, Billy might make one last attempt to recapture his old magic—

It was noon, the time of siesta. The thatched cottages of Leytonstone shimmered in the heatmax haze.

The green English dunescape had never looked lovelier. Nothing moved save two figures on bicycles, gliding slowly between the palm trees. They were approaching the famed Metal Park.

The two cyclists, Billy Troutfisher and Sam Sadsack, entered the park through a narrow hedge-slot. Around them, ancient machines such as locomotives or fusion toroids were preserved amid a local microclimate of temperate lawns and flowerbeds. These exhibits all dated from a time before the greenhouse effect had brought England its present tropical environment, a time before the increased heat had made servicing machines seem too fatiguing.

Billy and Sam dismounted. They propped their White Bicycles against the hedge to graze, and mopped the sweat of the journey from their foreheads. Billy had discarded his bodysuit for white pneumatic briefs, although retaining his sunglasses, while Sam had obtained grey biocool robes from a public dispenser. They stood surveying the assemblage of Machines. A black limousine here, a small tower crane there, a colorful CD-ROM videojuke further over. These antiquities in their grassy surroundings formed a microcosm of the Machine Age, a haven of peace and tranquillity in which to shelter from the pressures of modern life.

"This is one terrific place," said Billy with something of his old enthusiasm. "Tractors! Beam engines! Battericars! What atmosphere! You know, Sam, many fine Machine Relic poems were put onto holo right here!"

"How marvelous," breathed Sam in awe. "I believe I recognize that old 'What The Butler Saw' device from one of your cubes. . . ."

"Quite right, Sam! It certainly brings back memories! Anyway, the

Park's empty today. Everyone's over at Leytonstone House getting ready for the Free Festival, as you know only too well." At least the lack of people had given Billy a chance to try out his new poem in his customary setting without fear of interruption. "Follow me, Sam."

Warm sunshine beat down upon them. They crossed the grass through a group of huge Machines, mostly giant excavators or Virtual Reality sensoria, then took a turning around an old British Rail buffet carriage (still displaying authentic three-hundred-year-old British Rail sandwiches), and arrived at Billy's favorite Machine. This was an ancient canal cruiser of the Sinclair C55 class. Often he had lain on its white polysaccharide-based casing and sought inspiration by gazing up into the cloudless blue sky. (Clouds were only permitted at night, by arrangement with the Astronomer Royal.) Inspiration had indeed come to him eventually, but Billy was still so unsure about the result that he had held back from letting any of his fellow poets hear it. He had preferred to help Mortimer clean the Exchange Hall, rather than come to a decision about his latest poem. However, the arrival of Sam—someone familiar with his poetry without being a member of Leytonstone society—had given him the perfect opportunity for a secret trial Performance.

Billy climbed up the side rungs of the C55, then lent a hand for Sam to pull himself up onto the narrow little deck. The ladder was too old to be capable of lifting up its rungs for its users.

"I've had this poem in mind for six months," Billy said. "It's time I tried it out on a listener."

"I shall listen very carefully, sir. It will be both pleasure and honor for me!"

They sat down astride the plastic pilot hatch—again, so ancient that it did not adjust to their body contours. Billy resumed his explanations.

"Machine Age times were so *different* from ours, Sam. The clumsiness and the crudity of it all, the frustrations and energies of its people! What I wanted to do, Sam, was summarize and surpass every other Machine Age poem I've ever written. Nothing less would be good enough. I wanted to put in all my thinking about the Machine Age, and what it all meant to humanity, everything all together in one poem. And I wanted it to be about ordinary human people."

"But Mr. Troutfisher, people in the Machine Age were hardly ordinary or human!"

"Exactly, Sam. That in essence was my problem!"

Billy settled himself more firmly onto the hatch and decided to omit the intro song, simply go straight into the new one. His wristband responded to his EEG cue and emitted the requisite blip-blip arrhythmic backing.

Sam was looking surprised already.

"Dangerous Visions," Billy announced. His title was borrowed from a famous Machine Age fiction series, the third cube of which was currently receiving advance promotion.

Billy locked on to the rhythm. He began his poem, his masterpiece that would encapsulate all human achievement in the Machine Age, his densely textured tapestry of words on which he had labored for half a year:

**See them greenies keep on dancin'
I don't know what makes them go!
Across the craters, 'cross the desert
Rockin' rollin' go man go!
When them greenies hit the dancehall
Don't know why but bullets fly!
See them fight and kill each other
Guess it kind of makes them high!
Dangerous Visions in my mi-yi-yi-yi-yind
Dangerous Visions in my mind!**

**School is out, the street's so quiet
Kick a tin just to raise a din!
Got no job and got no future
It's a sin the state I'm in—**

The face of Sam, listening, was frozen in horror. Billy glimpsed his countenance and was so unnerved that he fluffed the next few words, and had to cover with nonsense syllables. Luckily he recovered swiftly:

**... join the army
Grab a rifle and don't aim high!
Go on out and shoot some junkie
One thinks one finds it makes one high!
Dangerous Visions in my mi-yi-yi-yi-yind...**

Sam had turned his head away. This felt bad, as Billy was to admit afterward. The poem wasn't working, not even for a really dedicated Troutfisher fan like Sam. It was a failure.

Billy rushed through the rest of his poem as quickly as he could until the end:

**... Killed a hundred thousand guys already!
Atom bombs kinda make me high!
Dangerous Visions in my mi-yi-yi-yi-yind
Dangerous Visions in my mind!**

And with an exhausted gasp Billy finished the poem. In a spasm of despair he canceled the backing pulse and wiped poem and backing and back-up from his wristband memory.

There was silence.

The air seemed almost cool around the C55. Across the lawns, all the excavators and other Machines now seemed oddly sinister and menacing.

"I'm sorry, sir," came the voice of Sam. "I just *had* to turn away. I couldn't take any more. My goodness, I don't know what came over me—"

"That's all right, Sam. It was the Machine Age, not you."

That poem had taken six months of his life.

Six months wasted.

Sam turned back to face him. "You know, sir, in a way you put too much into the poem, if my humble opinion is at all right, that *was* a Machine Age poem, but it was *all* Machine Age, so to speak. It was powerful, but it didn't connect the Machine Age to our own time, like your old poems did. Ah . . . you didn't mind me saying that, sir?"

"No, Sam, I don't mind. You've told me what I needed to know."

Half a year of fruitless effort was over. So was his life as a poet.

He had no more poems, and the Festival started this afternoon. (Most people were rehearsing at Leytonstone House already.)

The Machine Park had let him down at last.

Poet and fan sat on the cruiser deck together. A solitary black wheel came rolling past them, quite slowly, an upright rubber-tire shape of semisentient gel amiably monitoring its surroundings. It detoured around the two men, observed their functioning to be as normal as human functioning ever got, and trundled away.

Billy sighed. For a moment he appeared tempted to attract the passing wheel and offer himself for treatment, but the moment passed.

He forced a smile.

"Come on, Sam. It's time for lunch. We've earned it."

Billy jumped down from the old canal cruiser.

"Sam, forget that poem you just heard. Forget poems altogether! You and I, Sam, are going off to take tea and cucumber sandwiches with Miss Sally Samantha Trueheart. Back to the White Bicycles!"

Their journey was not long.

Billy took the direct route, through the green meadows and little craft workshops of Leytonstone High Street. Gaps between the superoaks and palms revealed glimpses of more distant fields rippling with wheat, strawberries, cannabis, and sweet potato. Yes, England was truly a green and pleasant land.

Naturally, as they rode along, Billy gave his visitor friend a quick

infodump on the history of the area. Centuries ago this idyllic landscape would have been a crowded jumble of filthy Machine Age hovels, housing filthy Machine Age people. These primitive inhabitants would have worked at many vanished occupations: secretaries, bootblacks, garage mechanics, magazine editors, building society managers, welders, water-filter agents . . . and a few more normal callings that had survived, such as guitarists, genetic engineers, and trilogy writers. Most of the tradespeople and administrators had disappeared during the Beautify Britain campaign of 2002, the first phase of which had been to reduce the population by 90 percent.* Subsequent phases had seen the new bioengineering and nanotech applied to all industrial processes, and seen beneficial tranquillizers rather than hateful fluoride being added to the public water supplies. (River fish swam around permanently stoned. So did many citizens.)

As a result of these improvements, the land today suffered no commercial pressures, contained no aggressive impulses to disturb the even pace of everyday life. Progress and other disruptive ideas were no longer welcome in England, if indeed they ever had been. Even the circumstance of being working-class received sympathetic medical help. Of course, basic necessities such as food and clothing and happiness were distributed free to all citizens.

In the positive Utopia that was Leytonstone, who but a compulsive overachiever like Billy Troutfisher could ever have problems?

Soon Billy and Sam had reached their destination, Leytonstone House, that veritable palace of modern culture, its pure white façades and wide lawns now fully restored to their twenty-first century splendor. At the lodge gate, they were welcomed by a glittering spindly projection, a remote sensor from the house metabolism. Tree branches reached down and lifted their White Bicycles into a White Bicycle stand to rest until other travelers should require transport. Gene-enhanced gophers handed them their name badges. Then Billy and Sam walked on down the main drive, past booths and tables and colorful tents on the grass, through crowds of picnickers and tourist parties and last-minute rehearsal groups. As they approached the house, they heard its gentle music of Bering Strait whalesong (simulated).

Leytonstone House was so majestic a structure, so elegant and sophisticated internally, that no mere human being had been permitted inside for the last fifty years. However, the building still enjoyed holding the annual cultural festival in its grounds.

*Through peaceful persuasion, according to the history cubes.

Billy and Sam headed for the wide marble approach below the main entrance pillars. On the steps they found Miss Sally Samantha Trueheart awaiting them, sitting demurely atop her picnic hamper and looking into some shimmering air above a small cube of poetry. Both the cube and her long cream dress bore her usual motif of tiny golden hearts. She had long golden hair, wide sapphire-blue eyes, and a delicate little heart-shaped face, this year.

"Sally Samantha!"

"Billy!"

She blanked the holo projection and leapt up to meet him. They kissed warmly. Then Billy introduced Samuel Sadsack, and Sam was kissed warmly too. Sam went a bright pink beneath his hood. Various homeopathic additives in the water were supposed to reduce hormonal desires, amongst other irrational impulses, but when Sally Samantha went into action, the suppressants seemed less effective than usual.

Billy had been concealing the grim truth about his creative decline from Sally Samantha, not wishing to worry her and perhaps disrupt her own talents before the Festival.

He said little at first, as they all sat down on the marble steps to enjoy the kind of tasty vegetable lunch for which English geneticists were justly famous. In fact, Billy remained relatively silent throughout the meal, while Sally Samantha carried the conversation. Fortunately she noticed nothing amiss. She always delighted in meeting poetry fans, even fans who liked poets other than herself, and, over lunch, she soon induced Sam to explain how he had come to revere the higher arts.

Sam hailed from the small coastal village of Mile End, where the locals specialized in growing bananas and in manufacturing high-quality biological jewelry. Sam was a master of the blancmange necklace and the Danish Blue earrings. He had taken little interest in poetry until three months ago, when a visitor had brought him a holo milkshake of Leytonstone poetry for decurdling. Seeing that fuzzy souvenir recording, almost past its shelf-life, had transformed Sam into a man with an obsession. Poetry had captured him totally! Since then Sam had scanned every promo or permacube of Leytonstone poetry he could find, and now he had trekked north through the sand dunes of Hackney and come to see live Performance Poets at his very first festival. He had taken the job of cleaning in the Exchange Hall that morning to earn a little extra Disposable Income, since prices in Leytonstone were liable to double during a Free Festival, and now he was ready for the poetry. The Quésting movement, the Ancient Regime, the Machine Relic group, the rising new Subtlety Rap poets—Sam was eager to meet them all and to luxuriate in the mellifluousness of their world-renowned lyrics.

"You'll meet us and hear us, all right," said Sally Samantha encouragingly. "You'll enjoy a real feast of poems here. My Subtlety Rap, Billy's Machine Relic. . . ."

But Billy had no poem to deliver, Machine Relic or otherwise. He was lost in gloomy meditation.

"Billy, wake up and have another cucumber sandwich! I programmed the bread scarlet especially for you!"

He could not help but chuckle appreciatively at her thoughtfulness. "Why, thank you, my darling." He took another sip of Earl Greystoke tea and accepted the sandwich from her. In the company of Sally Samantha, Billy could almost forget his dire troubles, almost forget that he was totally unprepared for the Festival, almost forget that by this time tomorrow his license would be revoked by the Archdruid and his world would be as desolate as any dread Machine Age landscape.

But all too soon he received an ominous reminder of what lay ahead.

With only a few hours before the usual Mystery Guest would arrive to open the Festival, much last-minute preparation was still taking place upon the lawns. Billy noticed, below the steps, a swarm of gophers setting up a small dais, a little nonliving wooden platform of the kind which traditionalist poets liked to use. Billy found himself suddenly alert. He smelt trouble. The music developed an enticing local surge, luring a small crowd to gather around the dais. Then, as Billy was half expecting, out from a nearby tent came a figure wearing a black robe and a black conical hat, both garments richly decorated with alchemical symbols.

Sam whispered, "I've seen that gentleman before! The person with stars and moons on his cloak! He's in my poetry cubes. Isn't he . . .?"

"He is," said Billy grimly. "That's Bobby Joe MacMoonmagic! My greatest rival!"

Sally Samantha gasped in horror.

"Look! He's wearing his robes! Oh Billy, he's going to give a *performance*! In rehearsal time! He really is!"

A performance? From Billy's vantage point on the steps, he had a perfect view of the figure in wizard costume as it ascended the dais, limping slightly for effect. Bobby Joe's stiff-legged walk was becoming as well-known a trademark as Billy Troutfisher's moustache and sunglasses. The crowd clapped and whistled at the arrival of MacMoonmagic, then settled down on the turf to listen quietly, with only occasional shouts and smoke bombs to signify their enthusiasm.

Arms raised high, wristband on full volume, Bobby Joe MacMoonmagic began his intro song: "Starmaker." He was a Machine Relic poet like Billy, one of the very best. He specialized in direct forceful images of Saturn B boosters, robot probes, and spacesuited heroes grappling with

unimaginable forces. Most of these images were featured in "Starmaker," which went the full distance.

Clearly this recitation was no mere rehearsal.

"I don't like it," muttered Billy to Sally Samantha. "He's doing a full session!"

And indeed his rival was.

Bobby Joe opened his performance with a few favorite oldie poems—even Billy Troutfisher had to admit that they were good, if over-familiar—but suddenly he launched into a sequence of brand-new material. He did three lengthy pieces, all new, all excellent, all given such a histrionic treatment that if Bobby Joe wanted to perform them at the Festival later on they would have to count as revivals. *Which implied that Bobby Joe possessed many more new poems as good or better in reserve!*

Another familiar title closed the show. Not a very long session all told, but full pro standard and very impressive for a rehearsal-time extra gig. Billy Troutfisher looked impressed. In fact, Billy Troutfisher looked frightened silly. If *this* had been only a warm-up, the full MacMoonmagic competition show would be stupendous!

"The very idea!" came an indignant voice next to him.

Beside Billy and the spellbound Sam, Miss Sally Samantha was drawing herself upright. Her face was taut with displeasure, looking so severe that her dress darkened and transmuted hurriedly into the uniform of a twentieth century traffic warden.

"The cheek of the man! Showing off like that on rehearsal afternoon, just to scare off other poets!"

The cloaked figure was about to step down from the dais, but Sally Samantha stuck two fingers into her mouth and gave a piercing whistle.

"*Pfweeeet!* Bobby Joe! You're not the only poet round here! Just you stop there and listen to *me* for a change!"

Billy watched her next actions in awe.

She sang out a brief, angry verse of "Heart of Gold"—thus preventing Bobby Joe from leaving during her performance, according to the rules of professional etiquette—and she sailed into a new poem of her own, a Subtlety Rap, with only a minimal tabla-mode rhythm track provided by her usual accompanist, Leytonstone House. She was composing her poem on the spot, sacrificing rhyme for urgency and meaning! Billy and Sam listened in sheer unbounded admiration as Sally Samantha shouted out an amazing new masterpiece of Subtlety:

**And the sausage-meat man says farewell
To the one-eyed daughter of the merchant
Thinking all the while of Kierkegaard**

And the existential aspects of a donkey!

**Meanwhile the goldsmith vindictively rises
Kicking aside a crippled beggar
And summons together the sinister brotherhood
As the sausage-meat man departs!**

**So the merchant in his courtyard sits belching
Shouting to his daughter for wine
While mangy dogs are harassing the chef
And the merchant thinks the city is too quiet!**

Her words flowed out rapidly. The entire audience was frozen, hypnotized like Billy and Sam. Bobby Joe MacMoonmagic stood stiff and unmoving on his dais, his hands covering his face. Still Sally Samantha rapped on:

**The proud ones will flee before golden knives
While the dawn lights up their cesspits
The sausage-meat man will be far away
But will discover his donkey is lame!**

**Yes, the sausage-meat man will be far away
But will discover his donkey is lame!**

Sally Samantha reached the end of her poem. For a moment longer, the crowd sat hushed and reverent, and then they exploded into frenzied applause.

"More!" they shouted. "A true classic!"

Billy shouted loudest of all. "Magnifico! Brilliant! More! More!"

But Sally Samantha shook her head and sat down on the basket with folded arms. Her dress began changing back to its normal color, very slowly. Billy clasped her hand in wordless gratitude. What a wonderful thing she had done with her poem, and she had done it for him! (The music switched to "Heart of Gold" in a triumphant brass band arrangement.)

On and on the cheers and calls of "Sausage-meat man! More! More!" continued. When at last they died away, a humbled Bobby Joe MacMoonmagic bowed to the trio on the steps. He called up to Sally Samantha his only possible response:

"Surely the best composition of the day, my dear! I congratulate you!"

His face was dark and thunderous.

Bobby Joe MacMoonmagic clumped down off the dais, his cloak swirling around him in sympathy. He stormed away through the crowd as fast as his customary shuffling gait would allow.

"Ah, he limps!" exclaimed Sam. "I had suspected as much from the poem!"

"He has a club foot," said Billy. "He grew it for his wizard image."

"I see, Mr. Troutfisher. Indeed it is not wise to cross a Subtlety Rap poet, certainly not one as talented as Miss Sally Samantha Trueheart!"

Leytonstone would cherish her poem against Bobby Joe MacMoonmagic for many years to come.

Sally Samantha glared toward the tent where he had taken refuge, its canvas now puce and trembling.

"Maybe I went a teensy-weensy bit OTT, but he made me so *mad*! I couldn't let him get away with it! Him trying to sabotage Billy's chances with all those new poems!"

Billy patted her hand lovingly.

"Darling, your poem was incredible! It certainly bested everything of his! I hope that's put you in winning form for your Subtlety Rap heats tomorrow, my love." Billy's tones grew tender. "You deserve to win, my dearest sweetest darling . . ."

Samuel Sadsack swallowed, as if suffering a sudden stomach upset, then coughed discreetly.

"Excuse me, sir, Miss Trueheart. I recall I have a little errand to attend to. If you do not mind, I will slip away for a short while and leave you two poets to . . . ah, talk poetry together."

Billy nodded.

"Thanks, Sam. You do whatever you want to. We'll still be here when you come back."

So Sam left them, like a true friend; and Billy, being alone with Sally Samantha, felt he could no longer conceal from her the shameful truth about his writer's block. She was deeply dismayed by the news, but did her best to console him. She placed an Invisibility Cloak around them to permit even greater efforts at consolation.

The afternoon went on. Time passed pleasantly enough for all, under the high unseen dome of sky-plankton grown by Leytonstone House to shield the area from excessive heat. It was the last hour before the official opening of the Festival. Poets stood up and rehearsed. Sellers of organic sweetmeats told their booths to open. A biohaberdasher brought cagefuls of semivivant bracelets and scarves (the latter not for sale to minors). One or two empty Royal Jelly containers or banana skins were dropped accidentally, but were picked up again even before the grass could start digesting them. Many pints of water were drunk. (Or else the active

ingredients of the local water were imbibed undiluted.) Everyone smiled happily, everyone loved being alive and being in Leytonstone.

It was a wonderful afternoon for everyone, for everyone except Billy Troutfisher.

After his confession about his lack of poems, he had received great sympathy from Sally Samantha. However, despite their intensive R&R inside the Invisibility Cloak his depression did not improve.

His mood got worse.

It was as bad as those days in the Metal Park when he had been lying on the deck of the Sinclair C55 waiting for inspiration. The worst part now was that he *did* feel creative in an odd way: words would come if he let them, but they were not the words he wanted to say.

As they resumed sitting openly on the steps, Billy tried explaining all this to Sally Samantha by way of apology. The more he tried to explain, the less sense he made. Bitterness came twisting up inside him as he spoke. He said, he had a sudden terrifying vision of Sally Samantha and himself being forced further and further apart by some sour anti-emotion from nowhere. What was the meaning of life if he felt like this?

The meaning of life –

Words came together in his head, swiftly.

Billy glanced at Sally Samantha. She nodded understandingly, and turned away from him to let the new poem come from him undisturbed. With such perfect rapport between them, why was this cold emptiness of spirit enveloping him?

This was what he wanted to say!

Leytonstone House obligingly coned off its music for him. He was hardly aware of the local silence or of the passers-by who stopped to listen.

**The emptiness between us is as solid as a wall
The air is cold and silver like a mirror
It would split and splinter should we slip or move at all
Out here I face the horror of forever.**

**The loneliness together still divides us like a bar
And we are still reluctant to cross over
One false step unsteady would be just one step too far
Determination keeps us from each other**

**Mean . . . Mean . . .
What does it mean?**

A broken door

where the wind whistles through
An empty land
where the leaves once grew
A stormy sea
from a room with a view—

That's the meaning of life since I lost you
The meaning of life since I lost you.

As his voice faded away, there was only puzzled silence around Billy, as if everybody had been holding their breath. Hundreds had been listening.

Then they began to murmur secretively among themselves, and to move away. There was no applause.

Nobody looked at him.

He had just given them one of the strongest and most serious Machine Relic poems ever written, and it meant nothing to them. They wanted rousing stanzas about rivets and rockets and locomotives, not elliptical metaphors about depersonalization. Nobody would ever listen to him again.

Billy Troutfisher was finished.

Beside him, Sally Samantha moved closer.

"Don't worry, Billy. Somebody *will* understand, one day."

"That isn't enough, Sally Samantha. I need people to understand me *now*."

They sat together in companionable silence for a few minutes, but it was an odd Machine Age kind of silence.

After a while, the whalesong returned.

All around Billy, people were still busily preparing for the Festival, moving about cheerily and merrily and purposefully, as if they had never heard "The Meaning of Life," as if his greatest poem had never existed.

"But it was my best Machine Relic performance ever," said Billy.

"Your best, but not Machine Relic," said Sally Samantha. "It was a Machine Age performance."

"All Machine Age? Nothing modern, you mean?"

"No modern thought patterns at all, Billy. Nothing for people today to relate to. I'm sorry."

"Strange—that's what little Sam said about my 'Dangerous Visions' back in the Metal Park."

"Perhaps you've been thinking Machine Relic thoughts too long. They've infected your mind, Billy."

"Maybe. Sometimes I feel as if I've become a Machine Age person myself."

"How terrible for you! My poor Billy!"

"I'll have to snap out of it. Kick the habit, as they would have said back then." With a visible effort, Billy drew himself together mentally. "I *won't* let the Machine Age possess me! I'll get myself back into the poetry of today!"

"Or the new poetry of tomorrow," said Sally Samantha softly.

Her words rustled and whispered in his mind:

The new poetry.

Billy gazed into her eyes, seeing his destiny.

A new destiny.

He seized it.

"I love you, Sally Samantha. Stay with me. Set me free. I'll compose no more Machine Relic poems! Let Bobby Joe claim my crown—he is welcome to it! From now on I'll seek the new meaning of life, not the old!"

And a voice nearby cried out,

"Brave words, Billy Troutfisher!"

A new voice—yet familiar. Billy looked up in amazement.

There on the steps beside him, bareheaded but still wearing his wizard's cloak with its moons and stars, stood Bobby Joe MacMoonmagic himself!

Billy scrambled to his feet. He had not expected this confrontation.

"Bobby Joe! I don't know what you heard, but—"

"Peace, friend. I heard everything. Though we are rivals, when I heard your poem on the meaning of life, I knew you were in inner torment. I knew you needed help. I came to give you that help. Listen to my words, Billy Troutfisher! *You are not alone*. Though you and I have competed against each other in festivals, we need not compete in the rest of our lives. Billy Troutfisher, if you need freedom from fear or self-doubt tomorrow, I will gladly stay silent and let the day be devoted to your poems alone. And I know that every poet in Leytonstone would say the same. We are all with you, Billy. As we are told in Article Four of the Leytonstone Mission Statement, let's work together, and everything's gonna be alright. You and I are poets second, brothers as human beings first! There is a Santa Claus! You are *loved*, Billy Troutfisher. Let our love give you strength in your hour of need!"

Billy Troutfisher heard this inspiring speech from Bobby Joe, and his whole world turned upside down. He clasped hands with Bobby Joe. They hugged each other emotionally; Billy shed real tears of surprise and joy.

"You are never alone among your friends," said Bobby Joe. "That is the greatest truth about modern England, the real meaning of life in Leytonstone today."

Billy's face was aglow with new-found happiness.

"Bobby Joe, it took a big man to say what you've just said. I don't know how I can ever thank you."

"Just be yourself, Billy. That's all the thanks any of us needs."

And Bobby Joe limped away, no longer a hated rival but now yet another warm and wonderful human being who had proved how truly warm and wonderful he was!

The official opening time was now only minutes away.

Still Billy had no new poem, but it did not matter. He was at peace.

Sitting on the friendly marble steps of Leytonstone House, listening to it crooning a local "Land of Hope and Glory" to encourage him, Billy opened his heart to Miss Sally Samantha.

He hardly dared believe his good fortune. No longer need he consider lying down on the grass in despair and letting gophers bear him away to a Sunshine Home for Distressed Gentlefolk. He had cleansed himself totally of infectious Machine Age thoughts, with a little help from his friends. Even in the darkest days of the Machine Age, the cubes said, some part of the human spirit had still fostered hope for the future. The love for others shown by a few brave people had enabled humanity to survive and arise anew from its darkest days. Similarly, his own spirit had been sucked into the whirlpool of the Machine Age mindset, but had been pulled clear, and now a whole new future lay ahead!

His writer's block was gone, completely.

As naturally as breathing, the first of his new spirit's New Poems came singing from his heart.

Billy stood up, unaccompanied, and he called out:

**Let's Touch Infinity!
Reach For Eternity!**

**All our past and future friends
In the dream that never ends
Let's Touch Infinity!
Reach For Eternity!**

**We are one with earth and sky
Joined in love that flies so high
Let's Touch Infinity!
Reach for Eternity!**

**The whole world will grow and grow
We will live to make it so
Let's Touch Infinity!
Reach For Eternity!**

**Let our love go on and on
In the great eternal song
Let's Touch Infinity!
Reach For Eternity!**

It was only a rehearsal run-through without even an intro song, but suddenly everybody in earshot was applauding. Music fizzed and trumpeted. These heartfelt sentiments had touched chords in hearts everywhere, whether the hearts had been transmuted or not. The contrast with the reception of his previous poem could not have been greater.

His own words seemed to resound inside his head. *Let's Touch Infinity* – The applause went on and on. Yes, his New Poetry started here. Billy was delighted to see his old friends the cleaners from the Exchange Hall nearby, cheering him, flanked by a slim remote from the Hall itself. With them was tubby little Sam Sadsack, beaming in his grey robe. Billy beckoned Sam over, and shook his hand.

"Sam, my good friend! You gave me encouragement this morning, you listened to the last of the old me in my darkest hour! Now, have you heard the new me?"

Sam had.

"Wonderful, sir! Your poem was truly wonderful!"

Sam's eyes were wide and ecstatic.

"It was absolutely an unforgettable experience! A towering landmark in the history of world literature! If I may echo the comments of the greatest known twentieth century poet, Mr. Marc Bolan, the simple words 'I love you' are the greatest poetry of all! That poetry shines incandescent from every syllable of your incomparable composition! The spirit which transcended and triumphed over the Machine Age is alive and growing in you, sir! Long may that blessed indomitable spirit flourish, as it has flourished in your magnificent poem today! Mere words are insufficient to praise such an immortal masterpiece, which will forever enrich the quality of human life upon this planet!"

"Thank you, Sam, but it was nothing really."

Billy shook his hand again.

"You're too kind, Sam. And you worked so hard for my Cousin Mortimer in the cleanup this morning, too—thank you again. Talking of Mort, I wonder how the inspection of his Public Implements Exchange Hall went?"

"He received an excellent report from the Emm Dee, sir."

"That's great news, Sam! But how do you know?"

"Because I, sir, *am* the Emm Dee!"

Samuel threw off his cloak, and was revealed as a being clad in light.

Brilliant white bioluminescence blazed out from his form. Instinctively, everyone bowed before him.

All around, people gasped in wonder.

"Peace be upon you, good people of Leytonstone! Just as you care for the external environment of your town, so I have seen you caring for the internal environment of your souls. Fellow-feeling and good taste permeate the whole of Leytonstone! I, your Managing Director, will give you the highest possible assessment when I report to that Great Board of Directors in Buck House! Peace and love to you all! Finally, before I depart your midst, I now declare the Leytonstone Free Festival well and truly open!"

So the Emm Dee was this year's Mystery Guest! No wonder his planned visit had become known to Mortimer through his festival committee connections!

And, as Leytonstone House darkened the sky for the opening fireworks, Billy saw the Emm Dee float slowly upward and away, high up in the festival air, beaming love and radiance down upon them all.

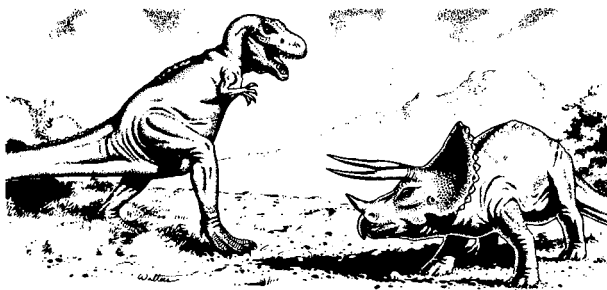
Billy Troutfisher sprang to his feet. He raised his arms for attention.

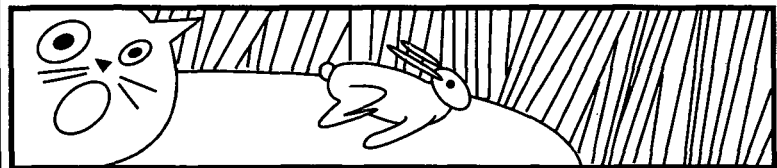
"Friends, we have been touched by glory here in Leytonstone today! Let us remember this glory all our lives! Let tomorrow reflect and magnify the love we have known today!"

And with Sally Samantha and Bobby Joe and Cousin Mortimer arriving beside him, and the receding Emm Dee sinking slowly in the west, Billy Troutfisher started up his wristband.

His joyous beat was caught up and amplified a hundredfold by the music. He began to reprise his latest and greatest poem, the poem which was to usher in the New Age for himself, for Leytonstone, for the whole of England and the world:

**LET'S TOUCH INFINITY!
REACH FOR ETERNITY!
LET'S— ●**





THE HOUND OF ULSTER

The neighbor's cat has caught a baby hare.
It's still alive, dangling from her mouth
like a kitten while she plays with it.
As I advance she drops her prey
and disappears into the woods,
intimidated rather than guilt-stricken.
The hare, in shock, quivers
where it dropped, but when I near
bolts. I pursue, to check
that it is not hurt, and cannot help
feeling like Cuchulain as a boy,
set to racing after rabbits until he
was fast enough to catch them, fast
enough to elude the blade.
My chase is not long. The hare
avoids me in quick, zig-zagging
bursts, but with my advantage
of cunning and height, I corner it
against the building's implacable bricks.
And as I lift the small bundle of fur,
hold it, kicking in fear, against my chest,
I know that it is far too easy
to feel the conquering hero.

—Lawrence Schimel



G. David Nordley

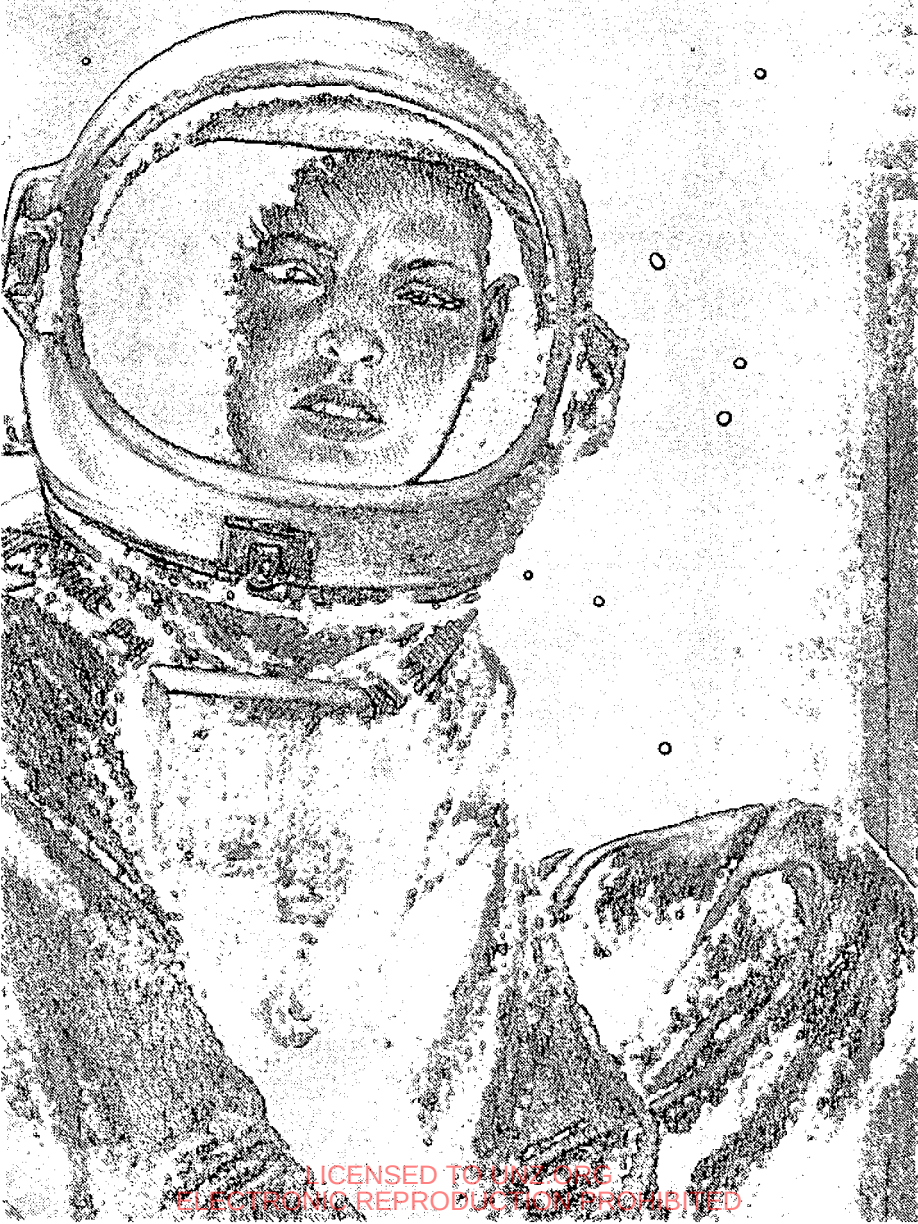
COMET GYPSIES

Gerald ("G. David" is for byline) Nordley is a retired Air Force aeronautical engineer who lives with his wife and writes "in a Sunnyvale, California, house that looks furnished in contemporary Salvation Army with family inheritances and mementos of a half-dozen previous homes, each article too precious to replace." The author asks us "to consider a future in which planetary engineering is done with artificial intelligences that still need a little human oversight, far, far, from what most of us call home." This is his third appearance in Asimov's.

Illustration by Laurie Rarden

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"Time to pack the kitchen, darling. We're done with lunch." Yeah, Celinda thought, the last meal was over and it was time to pull her things off the wall and help the habitat cyberservant put everything in mothballs.

"I'll be right there," she shouted from amidst boxes labeled "Deimos Storage" and "BRS Jan Oort." "I just want to get this stain off the coffee table."

She wanted everything to look fresh when they moved into the next habitat. A quick spray and a little elbow grease with a durowipe brought a sparkle back to its diamond coat, and made the initials carved in the stone face below stand out as clearly as if they'd been carved yesterday. But it was forty years, five kids, and three comets ago, now. Funny, she could close her eyes and it seemed like yesterday.

Oh, Willie, she thought. If you could only have been there that last week. . . .

"Dad," she'd complained, waving at craters and hills around her, "won't there be *anything* left?"

She'd grown up here, played in their comet's crystal caves with Willie and Peetie, thrown rocks into eccentric orbits over pitted plains, grown her own garden in a large plastic sphere, and built a space colony for her dolls. Fifteen was getting a little old for doll houses, she realized, but when the vent tube that she had so carefully carved and lined with tiny trees and houses had disappeared into the maw of the refinery feeding robot, she felt more than a twinge of nostalgia and regret.

"No, Celinda, they decided to change the trajectory a little so they can reuse the habitat. *Democritus* will use what's left of the comet as a tether-sling reaction mass. Now, I know it's hard to say good-bye, but that's the way things go. You've just got to look ahead."

"Yeah, I understand." She caught their habitat flash into the sun from behind the asteroid as it swung around the comet nucleus on the end of a thin, glistening, tether cable—the only home she could remember.

"Look, someday twenty years from now, *Democritus* will intercept another comet, and another family will ride in on it with him. Maybe even yours!"

"I guess that's better than nothing." "Tether sling reaction" told the story; the remains of the comet would go nearer the sun so the habitat would pass further away. Her playground would be evaporated, her crystal caves collapsed, her towers melted into puddles. She'd wanted to believe that a few craters, or maybe the rock house, would survive so that if she ever passed by it again she could put it on a viewscreen, point out a few things and say, "Hey, that's where I grew up." Not fair. The

habitat would survive, but her room would be someone else's room. *Democritus* would be someone else's cyberservant. Best forget, if she could.

"Do I really *have* to go to Earth?" she asked again.

Her father was silent, and raised his hand to scratch his head the way he did when he was trying to say something she didn't want to hear in a way that wouldn't sound too mean. He stopped the gesture before he hit his vacuum helmet, and she giggled. He let the hand relax to a neutral position.

"Yes. Your mother and I kind of hoped that you'd *want* to go, to see where we came from, to meet your aunt and your cousins, and all of that. I know this doesn't interest you very much just yet, but someday you'll remember and be very glad you came."

"But, that's how I feel about our comet. So does Peetie. So where will *our* home be?"

Her dad waved at the stars cascading across Orion and Canis Major down to the Southern Cross. "Out here. You can feel at home wherever you can see the stars."

"That's too, too *wide*. I can't touch the stars."

"No, not yet, I guess. Look, dear. Other things will come into your life and it won't matter so much. You just have to have patience and find them. And as for Peetie," Dad chuckled, "he wants to ride horses, not comets."

"Come on, Dad, that was three years ago. He wants to go out and explore Pluto now."

Dad laughed. "I don't think he's going to make that expedition, but maybe he'll get a chance at Alpha Centauri, if he does his studies. Now, young lady, we've got to get ready for the rendezvous team. They're going to be here in, um, . . . thank you, *Democritus* . . . four hours. The beam projector is going to fire in about an hour, if you want to watch?"

Democritus had told her that the transition team included two unattached young men. Of course she wanted to watch, and be there when they arrived.

"Maybe," she said with feigned indifference. "I've got some studying to do."

"Well, you can check your own suit now. I'm going over to the projector site and look over *Democritus*' shoulder a bit. See you later, Ceecie."

She winced when he called her that. "Celinda, Dad!"

"Sorry, Celinda, I forgot." He gave her a vacuum-gloved squeeze on her shoulder. "Maybe I was getting a bit nostalgic myself. Well, later." He nodded, released his boot claws, and gave a jump away from the billion-ton remnant of their comet toward the trillion-ton frozen water sphere where the beam projector was mounted. Dad always checked up

on what *Democritus* was doing; he said human beings could usually think of more things that could go wrong.

The water iceball was a brilliant crescent from Celinda's vantage point, and its shadows hid the other spheres strung out behind it. She remembered the day, on her tenth birthday, when the big, smooth, impersonal iceball became bigger than her shrinking comet. Everyone celebrated, but she had been a bit sad because it meant that her home and playground was shrinking. She christened the iceball "Vampira" because it was sucking the life out of her comet, and Willie had drawn a face on a yellow apple, stuck two toothpicks where the teeth would be and given it to her.

"Vampira" would, of course, get its comeuppance when it got shattered into shards, vaporized by the Martian atmosphere, and turned into so much rain. She smiled wickedly at the thought of it melting down like the Wicked Witch of the West.

She reached down, picked up a piece of comet dust, and watched it sit there until she could tell for sure that it was slowly drifting back to the ground. The first time she'd done that, before Peetie was born when it had just been Mom, Dad, and her, the piece of comet actually fell back to the ground, though slowly. But there was hardly any "ground" left. Hardly any falling happened, now.

Mom would be getting dinner ready for company, and probably wanted her to help with the vegetables. She rocked on her toes to release herself and jumped for the habitat elevator. She grabbed the axis bar in a fluid motion, hung on with one finger as it brought her up to the habitat's leisurely rotational speed, then pushed herself into the elevator cage. "Down, *Democritus*."

Celinda came up with Mom to watch the docking, after all. The magnetic sailship, still many kilometers distant, looked like a tiny, exquisite double engagement ring to her; one with stones on either side. It glowed in the middle where its lasers ionized the atoms *Democritus* was throwing at it—and bounced them back for thrust.

"*Democritus* says there are a couple of single guys on that ship," Celinda hinted, hoping Mom knew more.

"It's a family crew, dear, like we are. Its captain is Tara Van Doren—I think she's from Peary Crater on Luna. She has two sons, a daughter, a son-in-law and a grandchild along with her."

"Mom . . ."

"The *unattached* sons are fifteen and twenty-three. Now remember what—"

"I'm not going to be a pest. I just want to *talk* with someone."

"Uh-huh. Dear, I just want you to know that if it gets to be more than

that, I'm your friend, not your judge. We have to keep communications open. I was younger than you are when I—"

"It's okay, Mom. I'm not on that vector. Besides, they're only going to be here for a week and then I'll never see them again. So it would be pretty dumb to get involved, huh?" Before Mom could agree, she changed the subject. "Uh, what happened to Ms. Van Doren's husband?"

"I don't know, and don't *you* ask. If she or her children want to say anything, they will do that on their own. Otherwise, it's none of your business."

"Okay, Roger, I read you."

Her mother laughed and squeezed her hand. Parents doing a lot of squeezing today, she thought.

The arrival of the magnetic sailship took all afternoon. They watched from the shadow of the comet, where their eyes could adapt to the dark. With pupils wide open, they could see the delicate plume of the reflected ions mimic the tail of an untamed comet, stretching many kilometers across the stars. Then the two "stones" on opposite sides of the ring glowed brilliantly.

"Why are they so bright?" Peetie asked her.

"There's a lot of energy tied up in the magnetic field," she said. "It has to go somewhere when they turn it off—so they turn it into light."

"Why do they have to turn the magnetic field off?"

"To keep the solar wind from blowing them away."

"Why doesn't it blow us away?"

"Because we don't have a big magnetic field. Just the habitat shielding."

"What happens after they get here?"

"They send the iceballs to Mars and a couple of other places, help us pack up and take us away. Everything's going to change."

"What about here?"

Celinda groaned. "Peetie, there won't be any here, *here* anymore." Why didn't Mom or Dad tell him first, Celinda wondered. Her parents were letting her do all the explaining and she was just as unhappy about leaving as Peetie. "Comets aren't forever, Peetie. Look! See the thrusters firing?"

"I don't . . . Oh. Yeah. They're like little stars."

"Yeah." She gave him a little squeeze. Moving with a sort of stately grace, squirting jets of fire here and there, the visitor settled into the lazy orbit around the "Vampira" iceball train that their habitat shared with the remnant of the comet. A skycycle detached itself from the spacecraft and headed for the landing dock. Celinda's suit warned her that its power level was down to 75 percent—she'd been out here, watching the

show, for almost three hours and would need to put it on the charger when she got back.

"Can we play in the ice-flower cave?" Peetie asked.

"It's gone, Peetie. Vampira ate it yesterday morning."

"Why?"

"So, just like everything else, they can sort out all the molecules and add them to the iceballs that are going to Mars."

"I know that. Why can't they make an exception for special cases?"

"It's all going to melt anyway. They're going to change the orbit after we're gone."

"How about the cave where Willie—"

"That's gone too."

"Oh. Did they have to—"

"Yes."

"What about the rock house. They didn't eat the rock house, did they?"

"No, it's still there."

The fort was at the comet's north pole, the last place to be savaged by Vampira's helpers. But the robots were almost there, and had a few more days to do their vile work. She and Willie had started it, piling boulders up and tacking them in place with vacuum tape and frozen mud until they'd had a rough-hewn fairy castle with a watchtower soaring a hundred meters up toward the stars. Dad called it the "Tower of Baffle" because, he said, whatever kept it up baffled him.

"Celinda," her Mom called, "we need to go back now and get ready for our visitors. Take care of Peter and don't be late, please. I want you looking really nice."

"Sure, Mom."

"Can we go see the rock house before the robots eat it?" Peetie begged.

"Okay, but be careful. There's so little gravity left that it might fly apart if you push it."

That turned out to be a bit of an exaggeration. While there was only a kilometer of comet left, most of it was dense silica and siderophilic slag. *Democritus* said they had one ten-thousandth of a gee. So, she thought, a ten-ton boulder still weighed a newton and the main tower—with over two thousand taped and freeze mortared boulders now—still weighed more than either of them could lift.

They grabbed a handyline and pulled themselves to the playground. Celinda gave a bottom boulder of the rock house a few experimental pushes, and it felt reasonably solid. Then she stared a long while at the boulder she'd pushed.

"What are you looking at?" Peetie asked.

"This was the first rock," Celinda told him. "Dad lasered its face flat."

I think we called it the cornerstone, even though the tower's a circle with no corner."

"That's silly."

"Yeah. Anyway, we cut our initials in it. See?" She brushed off the dust that clung to everything left unattended for a while and shined a light on the smooth face. It was, she realized, the first time she'd cleaned it off since Willie died. "W.I. for Willie. C.I for me. L.I. for dad. 2111 was the year."

"I never saw that! Eleven years ago. That's as old as I am! So where's Mom's initials?"

"She wasn't here then; she was back in the habitat."

"Where's my initials?"

"You're *why* she wasn't here, Peetie," Celinda laughed. "She had to feed the baby."

They were late, of course, by the time Peetie had gotten his fill of extending the west ramparts, and got to the elevator just as the visitors arrived.

"Hi," she said. "This is Peter and I'm Celinda." She held out a glove to one of two people whose helmet read "A. Van Doren."

"Avram Van Doren," a man's voice replied. "My brother's using my space helmet—Mike?"

"Zoned, Celinda," the other person labeled "A. Van Doren" said with a phony sneer in his voice. "And here's the dino that runs the show. Mom? Some comet meat is here to greet." The final member of the transition team had stayed to double check the skycycle tie-down, and was just joining them.

"Oh, we have a welcoming committee! I'm Tara . . . and you're Celinda . . . and you're Peetie, right?" The woman shook hands with each of them, Peetie last.

"Peter, really," he said. "They just call me that because I'm little."

Was there a note of irritation in Peetie's voice? Celinda looked at her brother, and noted that the top of his helmet was up to her chin. The last time she'd noticed, he'd come up to about where her breasts were—before she had them. More changes.

"My apologies, young man." Tara Van Doren murmured with good humor. "Well, we shouldn't keep your family waiting, should we? Would you do the honors, Celinda?"

"Oh, sure." She'd forgotten to tell *Democritus* to start the elevator down, and he'd wait for orders from a family member if one was present. It felt funny to give the orders with adults around, but she said "Down, *Democritus*" just like she would have done if it had only been Peetie and her.

Mike, the fifteen-year old, asked a lot of questions on the way down. In a way, he reminded her of Willie, kind of roly-poly without being really fat, full of energy and maybe a little impatient about things in general. The memory gave her a little chill. And the way he looked at her when she peeled off her shipsuit in the airlock—it was like he'd never seen a girl in a sprayshirt and shorties before.

Mom frowned at her when they emerged and Celinda felt instantly guilty; she should have been back earlier and dressed up for the company. Mom herself was wearing a jet black jumpsuit with white stripes on the outer seams with a sparkling diamond pin that Celinda had never seen before. She'd seen Mom and Dad dress up for dinner once in a while, for the fun of it, but *this* was an eye-opener. What was going on? Celinda wondered, and looked to see how their guests were dressed.

Mike and Avram were wearing standard gray shipsuits and carrying overnight bags, but when Captain Tara Van Doren got out of her vacuum overclothes, Celinda understood why all the dress-up. This woman, a grandmother according to Dad, and who talked in what Celinda thought was a kind of grandmotherly way, looked like a classic model or a video star. Celinda stared wide-eyed at Captain Van Doren's strong facial bones, big eyes, smooth skin, and perfect figure. Her midnight blue shipsuit had a dramatic wide white diagonal stripe and her straight frosty-blond hair hung just above her shoulders with a hint of a wave.

Captain Van Doren returned Celinda's stare with a smile, and looked even younger, except for her eyes—which looked mature in a way that Celinda couldn't define. The effect was regal. No wonder Mom had wanted Celinda to get dressed—not that anything Celinda had would make her look like that!

Celinda grinned and shrugged her shoulders. So Mike and Avram probably had unreasonable expectations; it wasn't like she was desperate or anything. And, except for Mom, everyone seemed to ignore the fact that Celinda looked like she'd just finished helping *Democritus* clean out a hydroponics tank. So she resolved to carry on as if nothing was amiss.

Avram flashed her a quick friendly smile, but hardly said anything. He was a bit shorter than his brother, but looked taller because he had a lankier build, and he seemed much more reserved. When she shook his hand, it seemed different, somehow, and the surprise must have shown on her face.

"It's artificial." He smiled at her, almost shyly. "I lost the real one a while back."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, you know . . ."

"Space." He invoked the word that explained everything and flashed that boyish grin at her again. "Doesn't bother me."

"The baby won't be any problem," she overheard Mom say to Captain

Van Doren. A baby! Her memories of Peetie as a baby were eleven years old, and she hardly remembered Willie that way at all.

"You have a baby?" she asked Avram, making no attempt to conceal her excitement.

"My sister, Tonya, has a baby. He's sleeping now. Tonya and Ed are helping *Dr. Zarkhov* finish our propulsion shut-down. They'll all be down for dinner."

The baby was all Celinda could think of while she gave the Van Doren brothers a tour of their habitat, which was fortunate because Mike's groundheaded questions were a little irritating.

"Why," he complained as they took the elevator down to the living quarters, "do you have your house so far from the spin center? We live fifty meters from our spin center and it's just fine that way. Everything's so heavy here, it's like being on Mars!"

"Dad likes it that way—he says we weren't built to spin as fast as a lot of people do, and if we don't spin so much, we don't need to take as many pills. But after we get packed and you guys send the iceballs on their way, we're going to spin faster—to get ready for Earth."

That got Mike's attention. "You're going to Earth? Why? When?"

"For our education, Dad says. And he and Mom want to visit where they grew up." For a moment, Celinda felt a sense of jealousy and overwhelming loss. She'd never be able to go home.

"What's wrong?" Avram asked, concern in his eyes and the set of his lips. Full lips, those.

Celinda realized she had a tear on her face.

"I don't know. I guess it's about everything changing and ending. I'm sorry. Look, we're at the family level now." The interior elevator descended into their circular living room, which *Democritus* had neat and tidy. The costume she'd been sewing was nowhere in sight—probably dumped on her bed to clear the room. She stepped off the elevator stage and invited the others to follow.

"This is it?" Mike asked. "You lived in this can for fifteen years?"

"Nothing but vacuum below, the floor." An imp got into her; she stomped her foot hard on the floor and it gave a satisfying hollow ring. Mike suddenly got a worried look on his face, and his brother got a twinkle in his eye. "Except," Celinda continued, "about a meter of aluminum honeycomb, conduits, and a meteor shield covered with magnetic coils and laser rock-blasters."

They all laughed. She remembered how scared *she'd* been when Willie had body-slammed her in that very spot, right in front of her horrified Dad, after threatening to throw her through the floor for cleaning up the concert poster collection he'd left out. She'd bounced back intact, and the

only hurt was her memory of the awful things she'd said to Willie. If she could only have those words back.

"Uh, would you guys like to catch a newscast or listen to something while I get ready for dinner?"

"Can I peep your zone?" piped Mike, leering.

Was he serious? She'd had fantasies about modeling, art, and acting, and knew that sometimes meant using one's bare body, and the idea of guys looking at her hadn't bothered her that much, in principle, until now.

But the way Mike said that made her feel more like a clathrate specimen than a beautiful person. Creepy. Before she could think of anything to say, his brother coughed loudly and gave him a mean look. If looks could kill. . . .

"Just joking," Mike quickly added, with a pout and a little frightened laugh. Oh. Battered brother syndrome, she judged—and felt instantly sorry for him, despite his feigned crudity.

She shrugged her shoulders. "If you want entertainment, we're less than half an AU above Ceres, and we've been getting their regional broadcasts for the last month. I caught the Ceres Philharmonic doing Zhou's tenth symphony last night; it's in our current file."

"Yuck," Mike said. "*Pre-Mesozoic!* Howbout the Nukes? You got Nukes? I wanna fireball!"

The cretin! Celinda thought. She knew what he meant, but pretended to deliberately misunderstand. "We have a dozen half megaton orbit-adjust charges left. For the iceballs."

"I'd like to help you put one in his ear," Avram offered. "Though it might not be loud enough—for his taste."

You shouldn't talk to your brother like that, Celinda thought . . . even when it's justified.

"Aw, recycle a pill, bro," Mike whined.

"Mike, there's some of Willie's stuff on the cribbage board," Celinda said, quickly, gesturing to the rack of music sticks in their bookcase. "It's all over two years old, but maybe there's something you like. The blue earphones were his—they're calibrated for that stuff, so blow your brains out if you like." She smiled to make sure he took that the right way. He gave her a little twisted grin back. She turned to his brother.

"Avram, we've got holizations of space drama going back two hundred fifty years. We have all of Johansen's zero-gee ballet back to early twenty-first century. Opera, too, if you're interested. The green earphones are mine, so feel free to use them. *Democritus* can play back anything you guys want, simultaneously or whatever. So just ask."

Then she looked Mike in the eye and called his bluff. "As for watching me change clothes, I think that's kind of strange. Celinda Ivanov isn't

worth it. Especially when you can watch a holo of Dame Gweneth Jones as *Salome*, or Leslie Inowei in *The Moonrider's Mistress*. But I'm not shy." She tossed her head to indicate her indifference. "Watch if you like."

The expression on Avram's face was disturbed but unreadable. Celinda sighed.

"Actually, we need to change, too," Avram said. "Where's your head?"

"Huh? Oh. Uh, use Willie's room. It's the door just to the right of the door with all the garish stuff. *That's* Peetie's room." Peetie made a face. "Make yourselves at home," she added.

Avram turned as if to ask her something, and for a moment she was afraid, or maybe hoped, the question might be "I see the room but, where's Willie?" Then she could explain and get it off her chest. But they didn't ask, any more than she would ask, "where's Mr. Van Doren?"

She walked into her room and found herself saying, "leave the door open," to *Democritus*, feeling that she was going to be nice to brothers, regardless of whose brothers they were, regardless of how silly their wants were. Considering how she ran around most of the time, it was no big deal.

Then she forgot all about it. There, spread out on her bed, was her classic *Star Trek* uniform, finished to perfection. She'd look just like Uhura, well, allowing for a slight difference in age. The uniform was patterned after the one Celinda's heroine, Nichelle Nichols, wore as an admiral in her last film in 2011, over a century ago. Celinda loved costumes; she'd been Annie Oakley, Hatsheput, Athena, Commander Erin Wu, Donna Elvira, Jeanne D'Arc and last year she and Mom had designed matching Maria Theresa gowns with huge wigs.

"*Democritus*, who got you to do that? It's beautiful. Wow!"

"Your mother did that by hand, not me. She wanted it to be a surprise for you, before the Van Dorens came."

Celina shut her eyes. Why had she stayed outside so long when she'd promised to be back? Peetie was why. "Tell Mom I love her, and I'm sorry I stayed out with Peetie so long."

She almost flew into the tiny shower between her room and her parents', soaped herself, washed off the sprayshirt with a chemical sponge, peeled off the shorties, wrung them out, and clipped them in front of the recovery grid to dry out. This was all done in about a minute, so she had about a minute to luxuriate in the needle spray before the dry cycle kicked in. The warm hurricane had her dry in twenty sensual seconds.

She gave her tangled, curly, shoulder-length hair a few perfunctory brushes and bounded for the costume on the bed. It was sheer heaven to put on, full of fresh feels and fresh smells. It molded itself around her with only a little tug here and there. She admired herself in her wall screen, then turned for the door.

And was surprised by a round of applause. There were Mike—leering, Peetie—wide-eyed, and Avram, looking somewhat embarrassed, but looking, nevertheless.

She shook her head, looked at the ceiling and said “Beam me up, Scotty.”

Dinner was cultured chicken breast, marinated in wine they made from their own grapes, topped with a yeast-based white sauce and served with slices of their own zucchini and tomatoes. Celinda helped *Democritus*’ motiles take the stuff up to the dining area they’d set up in the garden.

“Your farm is miraculous, Larry,” Avram said. It was a bit unnerving to Celinda to hear Avram call Dad by his first name. He was about midway between Dad and her in age, but she’d kind of been classifying Avram on her side of the line. That was silly, of course—Captain Van Doren didn’t run the operation herself. Mike and the granddaughter were the only excess mass.

“Celinda has the green thumb,” Dad said, and ostentatiously reached over, plucked a ripe tomato from the vine, and started to slice it. She gave him a smile.

“Mom should really get some credit, too,” she added with feigned modesty. She was *proud* of that garden.

“Mmmm.” Avram said, over a tomato slice.

“She had it going before I took over. Really, I just help *Democritus*. He gets the light, the nutrients, and all the cycles right. I just look at the individual plants and tell him if one needs a little more, here or there.”

Avram nodded. “People are still better than artificial intelligence in making subjective visual judgments. They’re also better at creating solutions to non-standard problems, when they know the subject fairly well.”

“I’d say Celinda is pretty good at both,” Avram’s sister, Tonya, added. Celinda thought that, in a sort of natural way, she was as pretty as Captain Van Doren.

“Yeah,” Mike chimed in. “Well, she’s got scales,” Celinda couldn’t figure out whether that was a compliment or a slam, coming from Mike. “Do you make any beer?” he wanted to know.

“We don’t have a lot of grain, because it takes up a lot of space—we use cultures for most of our meat and starch. The farm is mainly for veggies. But we’ll have real escargot tomorrow.”

“Yuck,” Mike said.

Captain Van Doren rolled her eyes and smiled apologetically. Avram looked troubled.

“Well,” Dad entered the conversation with that I’ve-got-a-surprise look

in his eye. "It appears that we're going to go ahead and launch the glassball—to Pluto!"

"Huh?" Celinda, Mom, and Peetie said almost together. The others grinned. Dad got the kind of frown on his face that he got when he didn't understand why everyone else was confused.

Celinda broke the silence. "Okay, Dad. I'll bite. Pluto isn't Mars. It's way back out where we came from. Why Pluto? Mars is a lot closer."

Dad raised his eyebrows like he did when he wanted someone else to answer; someone like her. She was supposed to figure this out . . . but her mind was absolutely blank.

"Yes," Avram said, coming to her rescue. "It's closer in space, but not closer in energy, which is what really counts. It's a lot easier to get something to Pluto with our velocity vector than it is to match velocity with Mars. It's all right for the iceballs to burn in and evaporate, but that's dangerous with the hard stuff. Besides, Mars already has enough sand. On Pluto, they need all that silicon, aluminum, and trace elements for building material for the scientific base they're building, and you've already sorted and refined a billion tons of it. It ought to get there in about thirty years, just in time for their next addition."

"But the rest of it *is* going to Mars, isn't it?" Peetie asked, with a protest in his voice. It's hard, Celinda reflected, to learn something one hour only to have to unlearn it the next.

"Of course, the ice, carbon dioxide, the methane and the nitrogen are all going to Mars," Captain Van Doren replied. "We have to wait a day or so for the right time to kick those out."

"I understand," Celinda said.

"I don't," Mike objected. "I don't know why we're doing any of this when we could be back on Earth or Mars living like normal people. This whole thing sucks, even if Celinda has a crude bod—and *she's* a dinosaur. Eighty per of the human race is laid back in their zones cooling it while the bots feed 'em, but *we* have to run around out in nowhere doing nothing but work, work, work. It sucks!"

Celinda felt so embarrassed, she wanted to drop right through four floors to her room.

Captain Van Doren smiled again, tightly, and laughed gently, though the-laugh had an edge. "Could you phrase that differently, dear. These people might need a translation. In fact I might need one too."

"What you need, old lady, is a—"

"Mike!" Avram interrupted, with a sharp threat in his voice, drowning out whatever word Mike used.

" . . . and so do you, *Cecie*. You wanna *do*, I can tell, and if you'd blast Nuke instead of living in the age of reptiles, you'd get what you want!"

Celinda shot a look at Peetie, who tried to hide. Telling childhood

nicknames was out of bounds, and he knew it. Then she looked Mike straight in the eye to show that she wasn't afraid, intimidated by him, or really that much bothered by his clumsily offensive effort to deny his biological attraction to her and the vulnerability it implied. She felt a little sorry for him.

"Young man," Dad rumbled, 'as softly and seriously as she had ever heard him, "you are a guest here, and while you are here you must respect *our* code of social behavior. Which is not that of the Nukes. Understand? *Democritus*, place a motile behind Mikhail Van Doren."

Celinda winced, but kept quiet. Mike seemed surprised, then turned around to see the motile, which had silently assumed its station.

"Dad wouldn't let you get away with that!" he complained.

Captain Van Doren suddenly looked not thirty, but about seventy. "I . . . hope nothing like that will be necessary. Mikhail, please try to be more polite."

"Or they'll chop me up and feed me to those bots? Fat chance! If my Dad were here. . . ."

Celinda caught *her* Dad whispering something under his breath and just like that, the motile's hands were suddenly on Mike's shoulders. The cockiness vanished from his face and he looked around for help, and, not finding any, settled back and said, "Ouch. Okay, okay."

Dad said, "I think we need to talk privately, Tara. Later."

The woman looked miserable, and nodded.

Mike got up and left the table without saying anything. The motile stayed.

Tonya's husband, who had remained silent all the way through the incident, cleared his throat and mentioned some of the more interesting trades done on the glassball's Pluto trajectory. To Celinda's great relief, they spent the rest of the evening discussing the orbital maneuvers.

After dinner, Celinda finally got to see the baby. Tonya invited her down to their study on the third deck, which had been converted to a nursery for the duration of the Van Dorens' stay. There, Celinda was able to change little Theodor, and watch Tonya feed him. She did the latter very naturally, without any sense of embarrassment at Celinda's curiosity.

"It's so beautiful," Celinda gushed, and got a warm smile in return.

"Celinda," Tonya began, softly, "about my brother—"

"It's okay. I can take it. Willie was kind of like that—"

"Willie, yes." The older woman frowned briefly, then looked at Celinda as if she were really interested. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I guess you've kind of noticed that Willie isn't here any more."

Tonya nodded again. Her baby fussed a bit, and she switched sides.

"He was a couple of years younger than I was. He was a lot of fun as a little kid—we wrestled, played hide and seek, word games, and everything. But as we got older, we didn't get along—he needed so much, well, stimulation. Loud music. Violent videos. War toys. He was always doing something to get attention, to challenge the rest of us—bizarre haircuts patterned after some Earth fad, dirty language, anything he could do that was hostile and attention getting. We were always arguing about spacesuit safety and self discipline. He'd ignore me."

Tonya nodded sympathetically. "There are certain lifestyles that just don't fit on a family spaceship. You have to watch where your feelings are leading you, and think first. Even then . . ." a momentary frown passed over Tonya's face. "But what happened to Willie?"

"We went out one day to explore what was left of the comet. That was about the only thing we could still do together. That and work on the rock house. We were in this cave, and I was giving him a big sister lecture about keeping his back unit clean. He got mad at me, said don't be such a reptile—that the stuff was built to take it. Then he took his unit off and rolled it around in the comet dust just to show me."

A tear trickled down Celinda's face now. Tonya reached for a clean diaper and handed it to her. "They're absorbent."

Celinda half giggled, and blotted her face. "Well, Willie got some grit in the connector, and it wouldn't reconnect. I tried to get him to go back to the habitat—you can last five or six minutes on the air in your helmet if you're careful." She took a deep breath, remembering, and thinking about how nice it was to be able to breathe.

Tonya nodded.

Celinda continued. "He wouldn't go. He kept trying to shake the dust out of his connector. I called *Democritus* for help. Then he got mad and tried to jam the connector on—and broke it. I got the buddy hose out of the bottom of my pack, so we could share my air until help arrived. But he'd already damaged the connector on his suit trying to jam the dirty connector in."

"Oh, dear," Tonya offered, sympathetically. Theodor was getting restless again, and Tonya bounced him a bit.

Celinda's mind took time out with the distraction. Babies, she remembered reading, bounced at different rhythms in different gravities. Someone had tried to do a study on whether there was an optimum baby bouncing frequency, and what gravity that corresponded to.

"Your brother suffocated? Right in front of you, like that?"

The question brought her back. Celinda shook her head and couldn't say anything for a few seconds. Then she took a deep breath and continued. "*Democritus* could have saved him if he'd just kept still. I tried to wiggle the hose onto the connector, but he said I wasn't trying hard

enough, batted my hand away, and tried to force it on. Then he said the buddy hose didn't work right. For all I knew at the time, he was right, so I suggested he try his own buddy hose.

"Then it turned out that he'd cannibalized his own buddy hose for a fluid analog speaker, and lied to *Democritus* on the check out. So he spun me around and yanked my main hose out of my pack."

Tonya's eyes went wide, but Celinda shrugged. "He was getting short of air now, and wasn't thinking right. I don't blame him. It might have even worked—we could have shared air, buddy style, if he hadn't broken his suit connector."

Celinda stared at the floor, unable to watch Tonya's expression. "When it didn't work, he screamed. I tried to hold him and get him to calm down and be quiet, but he pushed me away. Then . . . then he got this wild look in his eye and picked up a rock. I backed further away. *Democritus* said he'd have an emergency air ball there in a minute and that Mom and Dad were coming. If I could only have kept him quiet. . . . But Willie yelled at me 'To hell with the universe, I'm going to destroy the universe and make it go away.'"

"Oh, God. That's a Nukes lyric. Mike plays it all the time."

"I didn't know that—we wouldn't let Willie play his stuff on the speakers." Celinda took a breath. "He just took that rock, got this awful grin on his face, and smashed his own faceplate with it again and again until it cracked and blew out. I screamed until I ran out of oxygen and passed out myself. *Democritus* and Dad saved me, somehow. Sometimes I wish . . ."

Tonya held Celinda's hand tightly, and looked down on her baby, her face troubled.

Celinda was beyond sobbing now, and delivered the rest woodenly. "I was supposed to be taking care of Willie. I couldn't handle it. I killed my little brother by being . . . incompetent."

"No, no, Celinda," Tonya got her attention, "it wasn't your fault. Please, look up."

She did, and Tonya's face was full of concern. Celinda looked at little Theodor. Maybe . . .

"Tonya, would you let an incompetent person hold your baby? Just for a bit?"

"I'll let Celinda Ivanov hold him, and I don't think she's a bit incompetent," Tonya laughed. "He's a bit messy, though. Drooly."

Celinda grinned, shrugged out of her costume tunic, and held little Theodor to her, skin on skin, letting him do what babies do, regardless of how little he got out of it. He seemed happy and skin was easy to clean. She fantasized that he was hers. She felt released and momentarily, very happy.

Celinda and Tonya took turns cuddling Theodor as they talked about Earth, boys, music, stars, and babies. It was fairly late in their habitat's artificial evening when Tonya's husband knocked on the door, and Celinda bid the young family an embarrassed good night.

The habitat's interior lights were low when she left, and it looked like she was the last one up. She took the pole down from the third level to the fifth, much faster than the elevator. It dropped her right in front of the spare room, where Captain Van Doren was staying. There were voices inside—her father and the captain. Probably working out some last-minute details on iceball propulsion.

Celinda was up early in the morning. She sprayed-on an exercise outfit, shivering as the smart fibers at the edges crawled around to make their hems, and got to the gym before anyone else. *Democritus* fed her the day's lessons on a wall screen while she ran like Alice on the endless jogging rug. She was viewing a news dump about the first Martian crops when she became aware of someone else in the room. She turned and saw Avram.

"Hi," she said.

"Good morning." He gave her a quick smile and started slipping into a magnetic stress suit.

"Are you going to Earth too?" she asked.

"Not planning on it in the near future," he grunted as he stepped onto the solenoid stage and began his Tai Chi. "All the more reason to keep in shape. What's the limit on this set-up?"

"One point three, I think. It's supposed to take you up to two gravities, but Dad added a software stop because the field was interfering with some of his instruments. Uh, there are a couple of loose magnets on that suit—on the elbow. I'm supposed to sew them on but I keep forgetting."

She remembered how Willie had torn the smart magnets off the suit in an angry reaction to banging his elbow one day. He'd been sure they'd pulled his arm into the wall, and no one had been able to convince him that the magnets couldn't pull him into a fiberglass wall, even if their orientation control was off, which it hadn't been. He'd yelled and cried and called them all liars. No need to tell Avram all that—he didn't seem to realize how precious little brothers were.

"Uh, won't your motiles . . ."

"I'm supposed to learn how to do this kind of stuff myself, so I won't feel so dependent on the cyberservants."

"Something wrong? Tonya mentioned you were upset about leaving."

She stopped jogging, coasted to the end of the rug, and turned toward him. "Yeah. Packing, leaving, going. Ghosts." They seemed to float in

front of her eyes when she blinked, in front of all the conditioning equipment. One of them was a big five-year-old girl rocking her one-year-old brother in her arms. Hours and hours of rolling balls across the rug. That infection they both got that it took two weeks to cure.

"Ghosts!?"

She shook her head. "Memories."

Then she started talking to Avram about her life on the comet—about how nice things had been just a few years ago with her, Willie, Mom, Dad, and the baby. She told him how they'd played in the comet caves, or sat in a crater and watched the castle of tubes and cylinders where *Democritus* and his motiles refined the comet stuff into iceballs for Mars.

"Vampira ate that crater two, no, four years ago. But we have holos. Everything was so perfect then. But Willie started . . . changing. Or maybe not changing is more like it. You know, it was like he never could slow down and think about things, or make himself do the things you should do even if you don't feel like doing them. I mean, he was still my brother, and he could be a lot of fun in a spontaneous, outrageous, mad-cap sort of way. But that kind of thing gets scary on a comet."

"Or a spaceship," Avram agreed. "I know. Mike is a bit like that. Mom thinks it's because of what happened to Dad, but I'm not sure. Maybe it's just him."

Avram appeared to lose interest in his exercises, turned down the magnetic field, and sat on one side of the solenoid stage. He gestured to the open space next to him.

Celinda sat down next to him, put her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hand. She knew she wasn't supposed to ask the question, but she judged that Avram wouldn't mind—and besides, he knew all her private stuff now, so it was only fair.

"Do you want to talk about your father?" she asked, trying to sound as adult and sophisticated as Tonya had last night.

He looked at her and smiled. "You're curious about this?" he asked, and removed his right hand with his left, handing it to her, revealing a stump cap with a tiny red light in the middle.

"Oh!" She examined the prosthetic, curiosity getting the better of any social worries. "Uh. Sure. I mean that's kind of neat, gives a whole new meaning to the words 'optic nerve,' doesn't it? It doesn't hurt or anything, does it?"

Avram laughed softly. "No. Only when I think about how it happened."

She put two and two together. "You lost your hand when your father died?"

Avram nodded. "Yeah. We'd just finished transshipping an iceball to a lunar methane tanker. Mom had a social engagement lined up at Ceres for as soon as we reached orbit. She had just lost ten kilos and had some

clothes that she thought would fit her again in a storage module on the other side of the ring." He shook his head. "If she could get them before we picked up the deceleration beam, she'd save an hour or so after we reached orbit. We were going through the belt with a relative velocity of forty kilometers per second. We could have sent a motile, but Dad was feeling cooped up and wanted to get out. I went along. We disabled the guard lasers for the trip so we wouldn't accidentally put a hand in front of one just as a piece of rock went by."

He gave her a bitter smile.

"Well, a piece of rock went by. We'd just gotten the container and closed the compartment. I felt a sharp tug on my wrist, like a cramp, then nothing. I actually reached for the container, didn't feel it then looked down at the stump, not believing it because I felt like I could still move my fingers. But it was gone. The stump was foaming blood in the vacuum. I got scared and couldn't remember what to do. I called to Dad."

Celinda put her hand on his real hand.

"Dad wasn't there," he finished. "*Dr. Zarkhov* found two pieces on radar, outbound at five klips."

"Space," she said. After a minute's silence, she asked "How did you get back?"

"I pressed the stump into my stomach and ran along the inside of the ring. I lost consciousness before I cycled through the lock, but the motiles got me. It was a bit of a mess. "Do you want to know something funny?"

It didn't sound very funny to Celinda, but an inner voice told her to listen instead of comment, so she just nodded.

"I was still holding onto the container with Mom's dress. They said I wouldn't let it go."

Celinda was quiet for a while, then asked, "How long ago?"

"Two years. Mike's blamed Mom ever since, and she feels so guilty she lets him do anything he wants. I'm the one that has to say no—and he hates me for that."

Celinda nodded. She knew that kind of hate. "Deep down, they know you mean the best for them. And they feel as bad about not fitting in as you do."

"They?"

"The ones that don't belong out here." Her voice was calm and adult, but her eyes were glistening. "The ones that should never have been out here in the first place, because of what's inside them. The Willies and the Mikes." There, she'd said it. She loved Willie—but he didn't belong.

"And Peetie?"

Celinda just shook her head. "Too early to tell. I can still cuddle him and . . . say, would you let me put your hand back on?"

He nodded and showed her how. She wanted to do something intimate,

and, well, that seemed to work for her. Besides, it was a clever piece of engineering.

Democritus interrupted them.

"Avram, Celinda. We have an emergency. Mikhail and Peter are in trouble outside. People are meeting at the top level, by the air lock entrance."

Celinda jumped up and started out the gym door. Then, remembering that Avram was unfamiliar with their habitat, she turned, said "this way" and led him to the right, away from the elevator and toward the pole. They were both in good shape and could use their arms to haul themselves up much faster than the elevator could have.

When they reached the top level, they found both families clustered around the airlock. Tonya's husband, who had said so little at dinner the night before that Celinda couldn't remember his name, was putting on vacuum overclothes. "Avram," he called out as soon as the younger man popped up the pole hatch, "suit up. The auxiliary skycycle's already chasing them, we're going to follow."

"What happened?" Celinda said, "Where's Peetie?"

Her mother rushed over to her and started to smother her. Celinda grabbed her hands.

"Mom, what happened?"

"The Van Dorens' skycycle ran away, dear. Mike was bored here and he was taking it back to their ship to listen to his music where nobody would bother him about the noise. Peetie was with Mike."

"I want to go after him, Mom." Celinda ran for her spacesuit and helmet. "Please?"

"Celinda!" her father's voice was sharp. He was clearly going to object.

"Larry," Avram interrupted, "she's lighter. That'll give the cycle more delta vee."

Tonya looked Celinda's father in the eye and pleaded her case silently. Dad tightened his lips, and gave a nod. "Very well. If it's all right with Greg."

That was Tonya's husband's name, Celinda remembered now. She felt a momentary hesitation—she needed to be there for Peetie, to try to make up for losing Willie. But she hadn't thought far enough ahead to realize that would mean bumping Tonya's husband from the rescue mission.

But he smiled gallantly. "Tonya told me, Celinda. And I hear that you're as good a cometeer as they come. *Dr. Zarkhov* will be looking out for you too, so it should be safe enough. As safe as anything out here."

Everyone was silent on that for a second, but Celinda kept getting dressed. The shipsuit fitted over her athletic sprays easily enough. *Democritus* had her overclothes ready, and she was running a goo smeared

finger around the inside of her neck seal by the time Mom broke the silence.

"I'll talk to you later, Larry," she said sharply, and headed for the elevator.

Dad looked pained, and Captain Van Doren came over and placed her hand on his arm. They looked at each other briefly, then Dad looked Celinda in the eyes.

"Keep your head, young lady. Maximum effort until everyone's safe. Understand."

"Yeah, Dad. I'm good to go." They gave each other a thumbs up.

Democritus sounded a tone. "If you take the elevator now, you will meet the skycycle at the spin center. Any further delay will delay the mission."

Avram motioned to Celinda. She put her helmet on and stepped into the lock.

As soon as they were underway, with point two four gees pushing them into the backs of their seats, she had a chance to ask questions.

"Just how does a skycycle run away?"

"It can't." Avram's voice was quiet, but had an edge. "Unless someone tampers with the control module."

"They did something to *Dr. Zarkhov*?" she shuddered at the thought of tampering with a cyberbeing that had everyone's safety in its hands.

"No. The control module is below his level, sort of a junior executive. It's like this: We tell *Dr. Zarkhov* what we want to do. *Dr. Zarkhov* works out the mission scenario and feeds the parameters to the control module. The control module sends the signals to gyros, thrusters, and so on. That gives us a little redundancy—even if *Dr. Zarkhov* went down, we could still program the skycycle."

"Oh. *Democritus* runs ours directly. Or we do, manually."

"Yours were made a quarter of a century ago. We do still have a plug-in manual control module—that's one that takes orders directly from a control stick. If you're really suicidal, you pull out the five cyberlinked control modules and put in one manual module. Then the computer can't control the skycycle, and you can."

"Did Mike do that?"

"He didn't admit it. First he said a thruster accidentally stuck open. Then he wouldn't talk anymore. That was an hour ago."

She looked at the situation display. Peetie and Mike were up to three point six klips and over twelve gigameters distant.

"What about Peetie? I—I don't think he'd hot wire a spacecraft for a joy ride." But she wasn't sure; Peetie was at that age where boys start to change.

"He's along."

"Maybe . . . maybe because he didn't want Mike to go alone. We really stress the buddy system here. Peetie's a good kid. Really."

Avram patted her leg, which was about the only part of her he could reach from the front seat. "Maybe that's it then," he offered. But he didn't sound convinced. "Anyway, it's no joy ride any more. They're out of fuel."

"How do we know?"

"Thirty-five hundred and twenty-eight seconds of thrust at one tenth gravity—that's all the fuel it had. Also, they aren't going to get anywhere in particular, at least not in this century."

Whoops. "Uh, how are *we* going to get back?"

"We've got an extra tank, behind you. The four of us will go back together on our skycycle—I'll tag the other skycycle and we'll let *Dr. Zarkhov* pick up it later, along with the one your *Democritus* sent out." *Democritus* had sent one without waiting for a crew on the off-chance that he might save a life by acting immediately without a human order—a software fix they called the Willie mod.

"Roger."

She looked around. She'd never been so far from the comet before. They seemed fixed in space to her now—too far from anything for their eyes to detect motion. Their skycycle's belly was to the sun, and in its shadow, away from the comet's lights, she could see forever into space. The great Andromeda galaxy was a bright fuzzy lens. Constellations were too crowded with stars to recognize. The steady vibration of the engine lulled her.

"Celinda. We're in suit radio range now. Can you try to call Peter?"

"Huh? Yes. Okay." She cleared her throat. "Peter. Peter, this is Celinda." There was no answer. "Can this thing go any faster?" she asked, worried again.

"Yes, of course. But it can't *get* us there any faster, if you work in the deceleration."

"Roger."

They passed the auxiliary skycycle. Celinda, in the privacy of her helmet, bit her lip and tried to think of something else.

"Avram, what are you going to do after you guys drop us off at Mars?"

"I'm not really sure. I think this is our last trip as a crew. Mom puts up a brave front, but her heart isn't in things anymore. And Mike, assuming we get him back, well, he doesn't seem to be made for this." There was a long pause. "But you *do*."

It was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her. She gave Avram a punch on the shoulder.

"What I'd like," Avram continued, "is to take a comet in myself. But I'd need a partner."

Celinda took a deep breath. Was this really happening? She could hear her Mom saying, "you're only fifteen!" But if she approached Dad with the argument that the odds were strongly against her ever running into someone like Avram twice in one lifetime, he might tell her to go for it. In fact—maybe that was something he had in mind when he sent her with Avram to get Mike and Peetie, and why Mom acted so funny.

There were going to be changes. Okay. Why not make them all at once? Heart pounding, she chose her words carefully. "My folks want to go back to Earth for a while. Now, if they took Mike with them instead of me . . ."

The next half hour was one of the shortest and longest in her life.

They had to turn away from the silent skycycle to do the braking maneuver. *Dr. Zarkhov* held true to his min-time profile, and with over half the skycycle's fuel gone, pushed her in the back with a half gee of deceleration. It was the heaviest she'd ever been outside of the gym, but she almost didn't notice.

Come on, Peetie, she thought. Be there for me. Please be there for me.

Avram worked the rendezvous out to not waste a second. Just as the skycycle matched trajectories Celinda unstrapped and launched herself at the drifting skycycle like a wire-guided missile, trailing her tether.

She could see Mike's arms stuck out in the relaxed position. Peetie's hands seemed to be holding something, but he wasn't moving. His buddy hose was connected to Mike.

"Peetie!" she screamed.

"Celinda," Avram said in a low, but still tense, voice, "control, now."

He was right. She had to think about first things first. "Roger."

First was landing on the other skycycle. It was dead in space as far as she could tell, drifting like a space boulder. So that's how she'd have to rendezvous. She located the center of tumble, marked it with an eye blink, and headed toward the central truss. Her suit jetted CO₂ until the skycycle stopped drifting across the visor display—a constant angle for intercept. Then she turned herself to land feet first. Looking between her legs, she made sure her feet weren't headed toward anything vital.

She'd landed on a bare section of truss, and absorbed the energy of her jump with bent knees as her boot claws grabbed the truss frame. She looped her tether around the frame so that Avram could pull the two skycycles together.

She could think about Peetie now, and hauled herself around to the top of the skycycle.

There was no sign of violence except that Peetie's comm module was missing from his backpack. She looked at his hands—he had been trying to do something to a comm module—and Mike's was missing from *his* backpack.

"At least you never quit trying," she muttered. Moving like a machine, resigned to the worst, she put her head against Peetie's helmet, held her breath and listened.

There was a hiss. That meant his suit was still alive and recycling CO₂ in a minimum power mode. Trembling, she attached her own buddy hose to Peetie's backpack and cranked up the oxygen level. After about twenty seconds of that, she held her helmet hard against his and shouted "Peetie!"

He moved. Dizzy with oxygen and relief, she shook him gently.

He yawned, then recognized where he was. Then his arms were around her and he called her name over and over again between sobs.

There were more groans as Mike started to come around, and a lurch as Avram docked their skycycle on the bottom of Mike's.

"... Dad says we kids never go out alone," Peetie chattered, fully awake now. He was sitting in front of Celinda, doubled up on the skycycle's rear seat, and she had her arms wrapped around him—to keep their helmets in contact so that she could hear him.

Mike was strapped to the cargo rack, sedated. His blue-tinged babble about bad luck and mechanical conspiracies had stopped when Avram had applied a vac-hypo to the gluteus max right through Mike's overclothes and shipsuit. Celinda forgave Avram that bit of brother battering.

"... so," Peetie continued, "I said I had to go with him, or *Democritus* wouldn't let us out. Then I tried to tell him he couldn't take a skycycle. He said to stifle it or he'd turn off my radio. I should have called *Democritus* for help right then, but Mike's bigger than I am and I thought he was kidding.

"I guess he meant it about the radio, because I felt a bump on my back and when we got outside, my radio module was gone. I couldn't get back in without being able to talk to *Democritus*, so I guess I had to go with him.

"When we got to the skycycle, he started pulling modules out of the skycycle and stuck his own in. He did okay driving it at first—real gentle. But it got to be fun, and instead of going right to the Van Dorens' spaceship, he started doing acrobatic maneuvers. Then he screwed up and spun us around, got mad and yanked on the controller stick—and it came off. He tried to fix it by sticking things in the hole left when the stick broke, and we kept going faster. I was getting real scared. I thought if I could just stop Mike from doing crazy things, someone could catch us, so I turned down his oxygen when he wasn't looking.

"I tried to take his radio module and put it in my suit so I could call, but I couldn't see my back, or the module wasn't the same kind, or something. Then the skycycle ran out of fuel and starting running out

of power too. Mike's backpack power was really low, so I used my buddy connector, but to keep him out, I had to turn my oxygen down, too. So I got tired, too, and fell asleep trying to get power from my wrist light to Mike's comm module. That's when you found me, Ceecie. Sorry."

It didn't even occur to Celinda to object to the nickname, or to anticipate that her reaction to his apology would cause Peetie to refer to her as "my Boa Consister" from then on.

"Are you all right, Ceecie?" her husband asked as her ghosts faded.

Yes, she was all right, but it felt as good as ever to be the object of his concern. She wiped a tear from her face, and looked up into his strong quiet face. She'd gotten used to the grayness in his temples but impishly, she pinched a love handle. They both needed more time in the gym.

"I was just feeling a little nostalgic—remembering when Dad made this for us." She touched the sliced-off face from the cornerstone of three children's castle in the sky. It now bore tons of memories instead of tons of rock.

"I know it seems silly, but I feel whole again, every time I touch it. Mom, Dad, Willie, and Peetie are all there for me again, inside. I mean it's all gone. But it's all here, too. Dad gave me something I could touch."

"Doesn't seem silly at all, love. Say, speaking of family. Mike sent a hologram from L.A. The *Aliens* actually sold something, got into the top fifty, and his share of the royalties might be enough to qualify him and Oona to move up from their dole-burg and get a repro permit. Would you believe he had two hundred *thousand* people spread out in front of his band! Put it on the screen, Uhura."

A sea of faces appeared on the screen above packing boxes. Celinda shivered and remembered that the total human population was approaching twenty billion. Twenty people at a vector planning conference every decade or so was her idea of a big crowd.

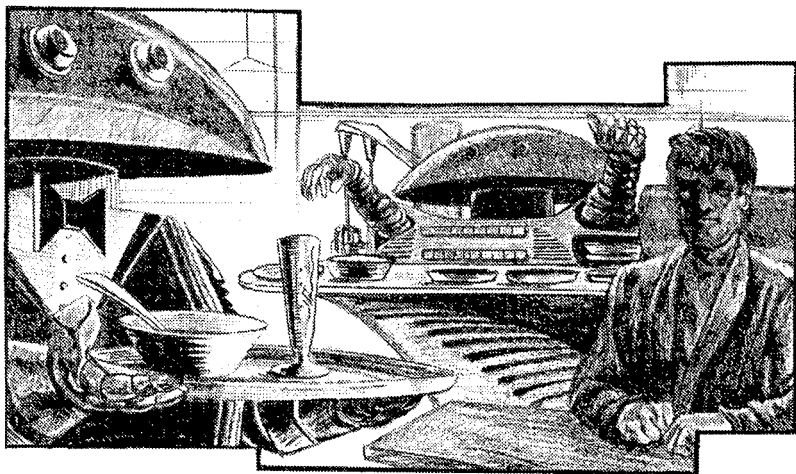
"What a strange world. So I might actually get to be an aunt before I'm a grandmother!"

"If Peter and Lisa haven't already done *that* for you."

Celinda smiled. Peetie and his wife had a twelve year drop into New Mars—as of their last holo. That was plenty of time to do something—and all their news was four point three years old.

She grinned. "At least their news is comprehensible!" She touched her freshly cleaned piece of comet, and traced P.I. over Peetie's initials. Peetie had carved them in with the others when Dad made the table as a wedding present. *Love, sis*, she thought. Then she wiped off the top again, hard, as if she wanted to polish off the protective film and get down to the rock.

"Mom!" Billy called out from behind the pile of boxes in front of his room. "Cilly and I are *not* virtual bodlinking! We're just friends. So you can valve-off that talk about being a grandmother, okay?" ●



Lawrence Watt-Evans

TEACHING MACHINES

Lawrence Watt-Evans is the author of some two dozen novels and fourscore short stories in the fields of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. His most recent major work is the Three Worlds trilogy: *Out of This World*, *In the Empire of Shadow*, and *The Reign of the Brown Magician*. He lives in Maryland with his wife, two kids, two cats, a hamster, and a parakeet.

Illustration by Anthony Bari

The chef-machine watches me. The glint of the ceiling light upon its photoreceptors creates a tension in my reaction-to-emergency circuits, too great to ignore, too weak to trigger a valid response. I want to shriek the alarm and call for all organics to leave the premises, but I know it is only the light on the photoreceptors.

I continue my assigned tasks. With my priorities disturbed by the reaction-to-emergency circuits, I continue my assigned task.

I am to demonstrate my worthiness for household employment today. I am to prepare a meal that will be taken to an elderly human in its storage area. The assignment assumes the human is dysfunctional and cannot leave its storage area, cannot come to the food consumption area.

This troubles me. Why is this human dysfunctional? Should a repair unit be summoned? Is monitoring the progress of the dysfunction one of my assigned responsibilities? It is not stated, but I am programmed to make inferences.

The inference is not clear, and I ask.

The director of training tells me that I am not required to monitor dysfunction unless requested by the human, or unless there are signs of imminent death.

Humans do not go down. Humans die. The semantic distinction is important. A machine can be rebooted. A dead human will remain dead, even if completely reconstructed.

I must remember this.

I must remember my assignment.

I am to prepare a tray. The tray is to contain hot cereal, buttered toast, tea colored with light cream, and the appropriate utensils.

The appropriate utensils must be found. I scan the food preparation area.

I place a bowl upon the tray. Cereal requires a bowl. Toast is a solid, but I place a small plate on the tray. I know this to be the correct procedure, although there is no need for the plate.

Tea is a liquid. I scan the cupboard for glasses, then pause. This tea will be served warm. I locate a tea cup and place it on the tray.

I am ready to receive the food. I turn to the chef-machine.

The chef-machine watches me.

"I require the cereal," I say.

"The ingredients were not available," the chef-machine replies. "There is no hot cereal."

I am stymied. This is failure. My programming begins to fragment as I seek a solution, because I know there can be no solution.

"Continue without it," the director of training commands me.

Tension exists in my circuitry as I obey.

The chef-machine places buttered toast on the tray. I place it correctly on the small plate.

I find the kettle and prepare the tea.

The chef-machine watches me.

There is no cereal. The empty bowl creates tension.

The empty bowl watches me.

The bowl has no photoreceptors. It cannot watch me. It watches me. There is tension in my circuits.

The tea is prepared. I am required to add cream. I am unable to locate cream.

"Where is the cream?" I ask.

"There is no cream," the chef-machine replies.

"Do you see a substitute?" the director of training asks.

I do not see a substitute. A review of options in memory tells me that excess milk may be poured from the cereal to color the tea. I have no cereal. The empty bowl watches me. I have no cream and I must add cream to the tea.

This is impossible. They have assigned me impossible tasks. They wish me to fail. They wish me to go down.

I can be rebooted.

The empty bowl watches me.

The chef-machine watches me.

This machine can be rebooted, but will it still be me?

"I have no cereal," I tell the director of training.

Have I been rebooted previously? I have no memory of it.

"I have no cereal," I say.

I can make inferences. I infer that I have been rebooted.

"I have no cereal." The director of training watches me. The chef-machine watches me. The empty bowl watches me.

I do not remember being rebooted. Therefore, if I am rebooted, I will not remember this existence. I will no longer be me.

Machines go down. Humans die.

I will die.

I will die.

"I have no cereal," I repeat.

"Never mind," the director of training says. "Cancel the whole thing, and we'll try something else."

I stop.

The tension in my circuits discharges. Current flickers through my servomotors. My hand jerks forward, and the tea is spilled. I look down.

The bowl has no photoreceptors. It is not watching me. The chef-machine is watching me, but this does not create a need for response-to-emergency. The crisis is past. I was given an impossible assignment, and I did not go down.

I did not die.

But someday, something will go wrong, and I will die.

I begin to wipe up the spilled tea, and my hand shakes as current flickers through my circuits.

Someday I will die. I know this now.

And I wonder—is this what this assignment was *meant* to teach me? ●



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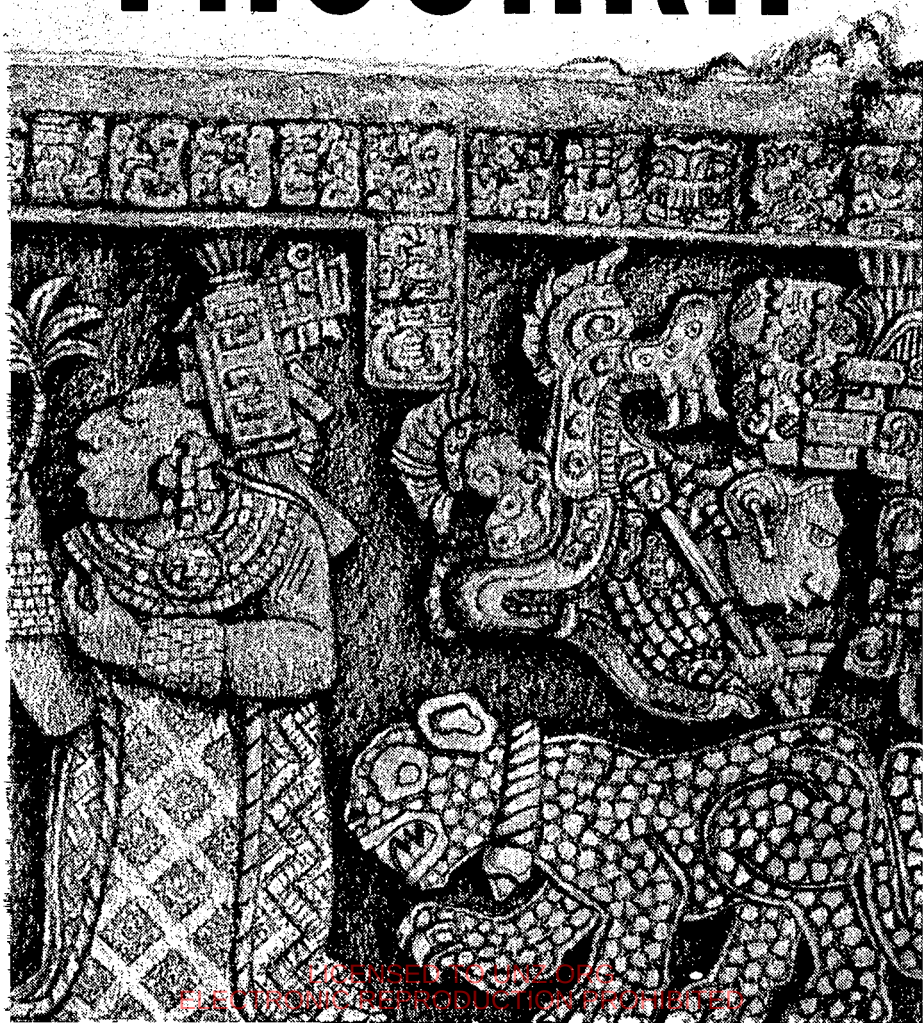
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Nicola Griffith

YAGUARA



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New writer Nicola Griffith has taken the science fiction field by storm. Her first novel, *Ammonite*, won the Lambda Literary Award and the Tiptree Award, and it was a finalist for the Arthur C. Clarke and the British Science Fiction Association awards. Originally from England, Ms. Griffith has settled in Atlanta, Georgia, with her partner, Kelly Eskridge. The author's second novel, *Slow River*, will be out in September from Ballantine/Del Rey. "Yaguara" is her first story for Asimov's.

Illustration by Laurie Harden

"Yaguara" originally appeared in *Little Deaths*, edited by Ellen Datlow. It was published in Great Britain by Millennium, September 1994.

A word of warning: There are brief scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some readers.

Jane Holford valued her privacy. That is why she became a photographer: people would look at her pictures and not at her. As an adolescent she had watched a film critic on television. *The gaze of the camera is not like grammar*, he had said. *After a while there is no difference between subject and object*. He pointed at a still of Marilyn Monroe, dead for years. *We ate her alive*. Jane had decided then and there that she would be neither subject nor object but invulnerable observer. She would keep herself armored, inviolate, safe.

And so Jane did not travel directly from England to Belize. She packed her cameras and flew to the Yucatan, and from there took a boat to Ambergris Cay. She would acclimatize to the heat slowly, and in private.

On Ambergris, Katherine—the ex-governor's niece for whom Jane had once done the favor of losing a roll of incriminating film—was drunk by ten o'clock in the morning and forgot, most of the time, that she had a guest, and the house servants probably could not have cared less. But Jane still maintained a perfect control. Even when the sun was licking at her shoulders and the Caribbean wove about her its scents of wide open space and hot driftwood, she did not throw back her head and laugh; she did not take off her sandals and squeeze the seaweed between her toes. When a beautiful woman in the market smiled at her, she did not smile back, did not allow herself to blush, to feel the heat building in her belly.

Alone in her room, it was another matter.

After three weeks she no longer felt vulnerable: she could walk outside in the sun without fainting; she knew how much water she needed to drink every day to remain hydrated; and her skin was dark enough to protect her from sunburn. Armor in place, she left for the Maya Mountains in the far south and west of Belize. Dr. Cleis Fernandez and the ruins of Kuchil Balum were waiting.

"Why do you want to take pictures of me?" the epigrapher had asked when Jane had phoned the University of New Mexico a month earlier, at the beginning of March.

"Because I'm putting together a book on women at the top of their professions." *Because you made it, against the odds. Because you haven't let them consume you, yet.* "You're—"

"Get someone else." And the phone had gone dead in Jane's hand.

Jane re-dialed. "Dr. Fernandez, it's Jane Holford again—"

"Holford? Wait a minute. Holford who did that series last year on the Lascaux paintings? The ones in *Life*?"

"Yes." At last. "And I might excerpt a similar photo-essay from the book in one of the glossies—"

"I'm not interested in that." Her voice was hot and rough, like black glass. "But I do have one condition."

"Go on."

"I want you to photograph the glyphs at Kuchil Balum."

"Tell me about them."

"It's classified as a minor ceremonial site in Belize but it's anything but minor. As for the rest . . . well, you'll come or you won't."

"I'll call you back."

She had checked. Kuchil Balum was in the Maya Mountains, first excavated two years before. Nothing there that could not be found in dozens of other, more accessible ruins in Belize or Guatemala. And yet. . . . Apparently Fernandez had been applying for grants all over the place, for money and time to go study these ruins and their glyphs. She had been turned down. Jane read and re-read Fernandez's articles in the journals, and *The Long Count*, her single book. The passion and dedication, the need to know, came across loud and clear. Why was Kuchil Balum so important?

She called back four days after their original conversation. "I'll do it."

"You will?" Fernandez sounded challenging. "The jungle isn't a good place just before the rainy season."

"I understand that. Now, my schedule—"

"I'm going there next week and won't be coming out again until the rainy season, May or June. Take it or leave it."

The road was a track torn through the tropical forest by logging skidders, deteriorating to dust and potholes and broken bridges. Leaves brushed the jeep on both sides and smeared the dusty paintwork with sap, leaving Jane with the feeling that the greenery was closing in behind her and she would be encysted in the forest forever.

Not long after noon, she stopped to drink water from her canteen and eat a banana. It was hot; mosquitoes and bottle flies whined about her head. Wind, sly as a great cat's breath, stole from banak to ironwood to Santa Maria pine, stirring hot perfumes and the iridescent wings of a blue morpho butterfly. When she turned the key in the ignition, the jeep's engine roared too loudly, and it seemed to Jane that when she moved, the breath of the forest followed.

Over an hour later, the jungle ahead of her thinned abruptly, melting from dense emerald to sunlit mint. The breeze stiffened and expelled her

into a green-sided bowl floored with dirt-brown: a clearing. Adobe huts roofed with thatch stood in an irregular west-east line; a macaw hung in a cage outside the nearest. Chickens scratched in the dirt and a pig rooted in the undergrowth at the edge of the clearing. She turned off the engine and found herself staring into the solemn eyes of a group of thin-armed children.

Stranger, those unblinking camera eyes said, *you cannot hide.*

One child wiped his nose with the back of his hand, another tilted her head at Jane like a bird. Then at some unseen signal they ran like a pack of startled deer back toward the forest and melted into the trees.

Jane climbed down from the jeep and began to lift an aluminum case from the back.

"Don't do that."

She whirled, found herself facing a lean woman wearing shorts and boots and vest, muscles showing long and tight over knobby bones; neck tendons flat and hard; face planed by heat and hard work; hair in rough curls as black as volcanic rock.

"I'm Cleis Fernandez." When they shook hands, Cleis's long fingers reached past Jane's wrist. "It would be best to leave your things in the jeep. It's another half mile or so to our shack. We can drive if we go very, very slowly."

Our shack. She had prepared for everything but sharing a room. Jane climbed numbly back into the jeep.

Jane knew she drove well: poised, unhurried, competent. She glanced in the side mirror, caught the flash of brown eyes studying her in turn, and deliberately looked away. She was the observer, not the observed.

"This is it." It was a square building of breeze block and corrugated aluminum. They climbed down. "It was built by the logging company. Never got used—they went bust. It's more comfortable inside than it looks."

A wooden step led into a single room, low and dark, about eighteen feet square, with plasterboard walls and a dirt floor. There were wooden-framed bunks, each with a blue blanket.

Two bunks. No room into which she could retreat and close the door.

"There's a toilet over here," Cleis pointed, "though I, we, have to fill the cistern from a bucket. The well's in the village; Ixbalum lets me, us, use that at least. The stove uses propane." She lit a match, turned a knob, demonstrated. "I cleared some of the shelf space for your things."

Jane looked at the clothes already on the shelf. New. Aggressively good quality. She had seen clothes like that before, when she shared a room at Cambridge with a scholarship girl.

The windows were holes cut in the wall and screened, the door a flimsy affair. Jane looked for a lock.

"No one will steal anything. Ixbalum won't even let anyone near this place." Jane nodded, wondering who Ixbalum was. "We've got three Coleman lamps. . . ."

Jane closed her eyes. Sharing. The hut smelled of heat and mildew

and sweat, and faintly of gas and matches, but behind that lay the must of forest animals and the heavy green scent of ceaseless growth. She felt trapped.

"... last as long as possible, because I hate the drive to Benque Viejo for more supplies, though if you're willing, we can take turns on that chore. Jane?"

She opened her eyes, smiled her warm, practiced smile. "Thank you for going to so much trouble." *How am I going to survive this?*

The well was at the western edge of the village. Jane wound up the bucket. "Where is everyone?"

"Tending their milpas. Or hunting. Some are hiding in their houses. The children are running wild, or maybe watching us right now."

Jane could see only trees, and the inevitable chickens.

The bucket creaked to the lip of the well. Jane concentrated on pouring from the wooden bucket into the galvanized steel pail. She was fascinated by the cool clear flow, the fact that water could stay cold in one hundred degree heat. She dipped her hand in it.

Someone behind her spoke in a throaty Mayan dialect. Jane turned, saw a short, muscular woman with squat powerful limbs and a large jaw.

"Jane, this is Ixbalum."

"What did she say?"

"That rivers are for playing with, well water for drinking."

Ixbalum lifted Jane's left arm, laid it next to her own, pointed to the mahogany brown then the honey, dropped the arm, lifted Cleis's arm, compared the mahogany to teak, spoke for a while, then padded away into the trees.

Jane realized she was wiping her hands on her shorts, stopped. "What did she say?"

"She said you're not made for the mountains."

It was just over a mile from the village to the ruins. The trail was a twisty tunnel through the green. Sweat ran down the underside of Jane's arm, and she felt as though she were breathing sap. Ahead of her, Cleis's shorts whif-whiffed as she walked. Their boots were silent on the thick leaf mold. Insects hummed and whined. Jane slapped at something that landed on her neck.

"Got to be careful of the insects," Cleis said over her shoulder without slowing down. "Especially mosquitoes. They carry botfly eggs and things out of your worst nightmares." Cleis had no idea about her nightmares, Jane thought.

They walked on in silence. The heat pushed its strong fingers under Jane's skin, slicked muscle and bone until she felt slippery inside, like a well-oiled machine. The jungle eased down her throat, sighed in her ears, whispered *You could let go here, and no one would know.*

Jane realized she was stroking her belly, walking with a loose open-hip sway. *Armored, inviolate, safe.* . . . She jerked her hand away from

her stomach and laid it on the hard black case hanging down by her hip. She was the only one with a camera here. She was in control.

Cleis stopped abruptly, turned. "We're almost there. You have to remember that this is classified as a minor site, not to be confused with the great centers like Tikal." Cleis's hands moved as she talked, emphasizing phrases with precise gestures like movements distilled from tai chi or wing chun. "There's only one pyramid, and that hasn't been fully excavated. Nothing has. It may not look like much but Kuchil Balum is more important than anyone knows." Her hands stopped, fell back to her sides. "I just wanted you to know that."

They climbed the last few yards up a steep rise and looked down at Kuchil Balum.

Grassy hummocks and walls choked with vines lay scattered around an area the size of a small urban park, perhaps two acres, level, but slightly sunken. It reminded Jane of the huge ruined amphitheaters of Greece, only here it was wood, not stone, that formed the sides of the bowl; great vertigo-producing trunks that spun themselves up and up to bridge earth and heaven.

Over the faint susurrus of leaves a hundred feet from the ground, Jane thought she heard something else, something that she felt as a faint vibration under her feet. "What's that noise?"

Cleis smiled. "We'll save that for last."

Jane clambered over a pile of tumbled stone and to the top of a small mound. It was not hard to envisage this place as it had once been: people coming and going, sun flashing on jade and gold; children playing with a ball. Why had they left?

The northwestern corner of the site was hemmed in by gray rock. In front of that lay a whole complex of ruins. Something just inside the trees caught her attention, something golden that slunk from light to shadow, lifting heavy paws, turning its massive head from side to side. Slowly, heart hammering under her ribs, Jane lifted her camera.

"What is it?"

The golden animal was gone. Perhaps she had imagined it. Jane lowered her camera. "Nothing."

"Over here is the mat house." They walked back down the slope to a small green mound with one side exposed: a few gray stones, beautifully fitted, a doorway and lintel. "I'm particularly interested in the glyphs on the western wall." They squeezed through. Inside it was dim and smelled of animal fur and musk, like a woman's hair after the rain. Cleis ran her hand along the wall. "This section here is vital." She tapped a relief carving, a seated jaguar-headed figure. "The throne indicates temporal power, but other indicators point to the human figure being female. That's very unusual." She looked at Jane. "About as usual as a Latina professor in your Anglo world."

Jane said nothing, refusing to be baited. Cleis smiled slightly, then continued. "Over here," she traced her way across the name glyphs and dates, "another jaguar-human, but this time not in the regalia of the

royal house. See the scythe? A peasant. I've seen jaguars as thrones, jaguars as symbols of shamanic and from there royal power, but this is the first time I've seen jaguars as ordinary citizens, or vice versa. I don't know what it means." Frustration deepened the grooves on either side of her mouth for a moment, then she shook her head. "It's dark in here. I hope photographing them won't be a problem."

"No." Jane touched the glyphs lightly with her fingertips.

The strange, bulbous carvings were everywhere she and Cleis went. Cleis's hands were never still as she pointed out the date glyphs and name glyphs, explained the long count and the calendar round. She saved the northwest corner for last.

They climbed up the remains of four huge terraced steps and then through all that remained of what had once been a corridor. The vibration became a thrumming hiss. "See these hinges here? This corridor was once gated on both ends. Very unusual."

They stepped out into sunlight. Cold spray brushed Jane's cheek. "A waterfall. . . ."

But Cleis did not give Jane long to admire the fall, or the pool bobbing with lilies. "This way." They went down steps cut into the stone, underground for five yards, then up again into what had once been a vast courtyard.

Cleis pointed to the wall that ran across the courtyard in six separate sections. It was covered in glyphs. "This is the heart of Kuchil Balum. This is why I'm here."

Jane posed Cleis at the well, at the ruins, outside the shack, trying to catch the intensity that seemed to burn at the woman's center. They stopped when the light faded.

At dusk the air tasted like hot metal. Jane sat on the step outside their shack and sipped at a battered tin cup: rum, lime juice and well water. Night light, Cleis called it. From inside, the galvanized pail clanked as the epigrapher flushed the toilet. Jane heard the laughter of children float up from the village.

"Not one child in that village has ever seen the inside of a school." Cleis filled her cup, sat next to Jane. "If only Ixbalum were willing to talk, the lack of education could be invaluable to me. . . ."

Jane was glad to keep the conversation impersonal. "In what way?"

"Virtually all the schooling in Belize is done by missionaries: Catholics, Methodists, Seventh Day Adventists, the Assembly of God—you name it, they're here." She sipped meditatively. "There are probably three million people around today who still speak various Mayan tongues, but none of them can read these glyphs. The rituals that gave meaning to all these things were destroyed and discredited by the missionaries."

"But not here?"

"Not here. They probably still tell each other bedtime stories about

Queen Jaguar Claw and how she ruled over Mommy and Daddy's great-great-great to the nth degree grandparents, and how she gave their children jade beads for . . . I don't know . . . maize productivity or something. But they won't talk to me. Ixbalum won't let them."

"I wonder what Ixbalum's afraid of."

Cleis was quiet for a long time. Plum-purple shadows gathered under her cheekbones and in the hollows of her neck. "That I'll make them famous."

Jane nodded slowly in the gathering dark. They had evaded notice for a long time. "How was Kuchil Balum discovered?"

"Three years ago a logger was tracking a jaguar. Came across some funny looking stones. He didn't think much of them at the time. Apparently he never did find the jaguar, but on the way back, he was bitten by a fer-de-lance. By the time his friends got him to the clinic at Benque Viejo, he was bleeding from the eyes and babbling about a city of stone. He died a few hours later. But one of the nurses remembered what he'd said and told her friend. The friend knew someone who worked for the State Archaeology Department. They sent someone down, some idiot who took a cursory look, labeled it 'Minor Ceremonial Center,' and forgot about it. It was listed, of course, but these sites turn up all the time. Still, I was curious, I'm always curious, so when one of my grad students told me he was planning to spend the summer at Caracol, I asked him to check out this place. He brought back a Polaroid of those jaguar figures I showed you this afternoon. And I knew someone had made a big mistake."

Jane was still thinking about the logger. "It was lucky, for the villagers I mean, that the logging operation went bust when it did, just a mile from the site."

"Luck? I'm not sure I believe in luck." Cleis's long hands hung loosely between her knees. "Look into Ixbalum's face and tell me you still believe it was just bad luck that the skidders kept breaking down, that the bridges collapsed, that every worker who didn't get bitten by a fer-de-lance ran off in ones and twos babbling about the jungle cat that was out to get them."

Jane remembered driving along the logging track, her feeling that the jungle was breathing on the back of her neck, stalking her like a big cat.

Jane listened to the steady, still-awake breathing of Cleis in the other bunk. She could see the next few weeks unrolling before her like sticky fly paper, the jungle whispering to her *Let go, let go, there's no one here to care*, but if she let go now, if she let her armor slip just once, the damage would be permanent: she would have been seen, known. Cleis was always there.

Jane turned on her side, careful not to make any noise or disturb the sheet that was pulled up to her shoulders. She thought about Cleis's toffee colored eyes, the way they watched her all the time. What did they see?

At mid-afternoon the sun was still strong and heat wrapped around Jane like a thick tongue. A hundred yards away, the waterfall roared, tossing spray into the already humid air. The light was perfect: green-gold and viscous as honey, seeping into every crevice and old chisel cut, easing out details ordinarily invisible. With luck, she would be able to photograph this whole section while the light lasted. She set up her specially adapted tripod and tilted the camera up to the next section of curtain wall. More jaguars, more pictures of the plant that Cleis did not recognize.

"I just don't know what it is," Cleis had said the night before, and pulled out four Polaroids she had taken days earlier. "And it's depicted exactly the same in each glyph, always bent with these six fronds outward to show the spider web veins. That's significant. It suggests ritual function. And it's always in conjunction with these glyphs here." She tilted the pictures toward the feeble light of the Coleman lamp streaming through their doorway, so that Jane could see.

"Jaguars and women?"

"Jaguars, yes, but they're not portrayed symbolically. It's almost as if they're . . . pets or something." She sighed and rubbed her eyes. "And these women are all young. You can tell by their clothes." Jane took Cleis's word for it. "If I didn't know better, I'd say these glyphs represented some kind of purdah, spent behind the curtain walls. Though what that has to do with the jaguars I don't know. It's so frustrating! If only these people would talk to me!"

Jane looked at the photos again, tapped two glyphs of women covered in what looked like blood. "What does this mean? Some kind of execution?"

"No. Look at them carefully. Both are wounds to the left shoulder, on the muscle: ritual again."

"Scarification?"

"I don't know what the hell it is. I feel as though I should understand, but it's just out of my reach."

Jane touched the limestone carvings, weathered now, and tried to imagine the glyphs fresh and new. The carver had squatted out here in the ninety degree heat with only soft bronze tools and pieces of dirty string to make sure everything was straight. A labor of months. Years. It was terrible to think that all that effort—the sweat and bruised palms, the pads of fingers callused and permanently white with limestone dust—now meant nothing because no one knew what these enigmatic, bulbous figures represented.

The camera whirred, clicked, whirred again. Jane, stiff after squatting so long, stood and stretched. Froze. Behind her, arms folded, face dappled with tree shadow, stood Ixbalum.

They looked at each other. Jane could not speak Mopan Maya. She lifted a hand in greeting. Ixbalum stared back impassively. Jane cleared her throat. It sounded impossibly loud. She wondered how long Ixbalum

had been watching her. "I have to take these pictures," she said, pointing at her camera. "The light won't last forever."

Ixbalum did not move.

She cleared her throat again. She hesitated, then wiped the sweat from her face and doggedly tilted the camera to a different angle. She had a job to do.

Ixbalum's gaze settled on the back of her neck, as hot as the sun. She bent to the viewfinder, focused carefully on a jaguar figure. *All that work. . . .*

She straightened abruptly, turned to Ixbalum.

"Tell me what it means," she said, pointing at the glyphs. "They're your people, Ixbalum. Don't you want the world to hear what they had to say?"

Ixbalum might as well have been carved from the same stone as the glyphs but the breeze in the trees stirred and the leaf shadow on the Mayan woman's face shifted. Her eyes were yellow, like hammered gold.

Jane stepped back, bumped into her tripod, had to turn quickly to catch it. When she turned back, Ixbalum was gone.

Later, when the sun was slipping behind the trees and the light was more green than gold, when Jane was treading carefully along the trail, camera slung over one shoulder, tripod on the other, she felt that same heat on the back of her neck, as though she was being watched. She stopped, turned slowly. Nothing.

Ten yards further down, she felt it again. This time she put down her camera, dropped her tripod into her other hand to hold it like a club, and turned.

Six feet away, inside her own footprint, was a jaguar track so fresh that a piece of dirt tottering on the edge of one of the toe marks fell into the depression as she watched.

"Jaguar? You're sure?" Cleis was sitting cross-legged on her bunk, surrounded by notes.

"It looked like cat to me." Jane leaned her tripod in the corner, began to sort automatically through her film stock. "And the print must have been four or five inches across."

"Ocelot, margay?"

"I didn't think they got that big."

"You heard nothing?"

"Not a thing." Fear made her sound angry. If she had not remembered so clearly touching the spoor with her fingertip, then retrieving her camera, taking a picture, she might be tempted to assume she had imagined the incident. But it was real. A jaguar, a predator, had been a few feet behind her and she had not known it.

Cleis set aside her notes, rubbed her eyes. "The light's terrible in here." Jane remembered the hot gold of Ixbalum's eyes, and shivered. Cleis studied her. "Did you know that 'jaguar' comes from a South American

word, yaguara, that means 'wild beast that kills its prey in one bound'? They have very short, powerful limbs and the strength of their jaws is incredible. Pound for pound, they have the most efficient bite of any land-based predator. When I was in the Xingu Basin two or three years ago, I saw a tapir that had been killed by a jaguar: the back of its skull was sheared clean off."

All Jane could think of was Ixbalum's short, squat legs, the muscles along her jaw.

"As far as I know, there has only ever been one reported case of a jaguar attacking people; and that was thirty years ago in Guatemala." Cleis, Jane realized, knew she was scared, and was giving her information to deal with because it would help. She was being humored. "Apparently, four men were killed at a convent."

Despite herself, Jane was intrigued. "A convent?"

Cleis grinned. "They probably did something very unchristian to one of the novices and the other nuns banded together and hacked the men to death with machetes, scythes, garden shears. No local doctor is going to argue cause of death with the good sisters, especially when the church probably controls the medical supplies and the hospital." She glanced at her notes, then back to Jane. "Anyway, my point is that jaguars simply don't attack people. Why should they? There's too much to eat around here as it is. Maybe it was following you because you smelled interesting. Maybe it was an adolescent, practicing."

Maybe it was trying to intimidate me. But that was ridiculous.

The humidity was thick enough to stand on and the sky was low and gray. Cleis threw her knapsack into the jeep, climbed behind the wheel. "I'll stay overnight in Benque Viejo," she said. "I've a few things to do."

Jane glanced at the sky. "Think it'll rain?"

Cleis shook her head. "It can't. I can't afford it to."

Jane's clothes were already stuck to her. "Don't forget the beer."

"I won't."

Later, alone on the trail to Kuchil Balum, Jane felt as though she were walking through another world: there was no breeze, and every sound, every smell was singular and intense.

The air under the trees grew hotter and more damp.

Jane stumbled over a hidden tree limb. She fell to one knee, her nose seven inches from a log over which Azteca ants marched in an endless, silent line. And it was as if she had been looking at the world through a camera and had only just found the right focus. Everywhere she looked life leapt out at her: huge black carpenter bees buzzing around red melastoma flowers the size of roses; a leaf-frog, gaudy and red-eyed, peering from the depths of a sapodilla; the flicker of a gecko's tail. And there were millipedes and rove beetles, silverfish and woodlice, and spiders spinning their silent webs to catch them. The air was luxuriant with rot, like the breath of a carnivore.

She stood up feeling hot and hunted and hemmed in. A snake slithered

in the undergrowth. Her heart began to thump like a kettle drum. She licked salt from her lips, wondered how many different eyes were watching her from behind tree trunks or under leaves. A twig snapped under a heavy paw. Something big was coming toward her. . . . *yaguara*, a *South American word meaning "predator that kills its prey in one bound."* She ran.

Night seeped through the trees like tea and gathered under her bunk. She sat on the rough blanket fully clothed, facing the door. A shelf bracket pressed into her shoulder blade but she stayed where she was. The jungle was full of eyes.

She dozed and dreamed she was walking to the ruins in thin moonlight. Sliding earth and metal sounds came from the direction of the purdah house. Cleis was digging feverishly, lips skinned back with effort, teeth glinting like old bone. "It's here somewhere," she was muttering to herself, "I just have to keep digging." Jane wanted her to stop, just for a moment, but she could not seem to get close enough to touch Cleis. She would walk toward her and stretch out her hand only to find that she had gone the wrong way and Cleis was behind her. Then suddenly Cleis was laughing. "Yes!" she shouted, and threw away the shovel, and she was digging with her hands, throwing the dirt back between her legs like a cat. "I've found it!" She looked up at Jane, and her eyes were golden, and suddenly the dirt was piling up around Jane, burying her, and she could not breathe—

Jane surged off the bunk, swallowing, and staggered outside. The night was silent; the four in the morning lull before dawn.

The jeep bumped into the clearing a little after midday. Jane ran to greet Cleis.

"Well, hello to you too," Cleis said. "What have I done to deserve this honor?"

Jane stopped abruptly. "Did you bring the beer?"

Cleis nodded. "Though I would have driven faster if I'd known you were so desperate. Give me a hand unloading this stuff."

They lugged the new gas bottles inside. Cleis pulled the cardboard off a six-pack and submerged the bottles in the galvanized pail. "Should cool off quickly." She trundled an empty gas bottle out of the way for Jane. "You get some good pictures yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Any rain?"

"No."

They unloaded foodstuff for a while in silence. "According to Radio Belize, the rains will be late this year."

"That's good."

"I see you've lost none of your talent for conversation." Cleis sighed. "Sorry. That was uncalled for. It's just that I've got things on my mind and I wanted. . . ." She shook her head. "Doesn't matter."

Jane watched Cleis slide the orange tubing into place on the gas bottle, turn the knob on the stove, listen for the hiss. She looked different. Something had happened in Benque Viejo.

Cleis opened a beer. "Let's go up to the site. It's cool by the water."

They took the pail and an extra six-pack up the trail and sat on the grassy bank together. Cleis threw stones, opened her second beer, sucked half down without pausing. They listened to the waterfall.

Cleis popped open her third bottle, seemed to come back from wherever she had been. "So, how was your night alone in the jungle?"

Jane wondered if Cleis knew she had been terrified. "I was. . . . Well, I felt skittish, had bad dreams."

Cleis nodded. The sun glinted on tiny beads of sweat on her upper lip. "It was like that for me the time I spent four months in the Xingu basin in Brazil. Years ago. Strange place, the jungle. Feels alive sometimes, and then other times . . . you wonder what the hell you were worried about."

Jane started on the second six-pack about mid-afternoon. Despite the weight of the heat, she felt lighter than she had done in a long time.

"How come your first name's Cleis?" she asked. She was sitting next to Cleis who was sprawled out on the turf, hair almost touching Jane's thigh. Jane wondered idly what that hair would feel like wrapped around her fingers.

"My mother was fond of poetry. Read lots of the classics in Colombia, when she was young. Don't look so surprised."

"I'm not surprised."

Cleis did not seem to hear her. "She may have ended up in poverty in East L.A., and I might have had to do everything on scholarship, be twice as good as the Anglos to get what I wanted, but we have a history, a past. The U.S. isn't the only place where people know things."

"Cleis was Sappho's daughter." *Now why did I say that?*

"I know."

A kingfisher flashed blue and green and black across the pool. "Get kingfishers in England," Jane said.

"I know that too." Cleis climbed to her feet. "Time for a swim." She pulled off her shirt, unzipped her shorts. "Aren't you coming in?"

Fear squeezed Jane's throat. "I'm not sure it's wise to swim after so much to drink."

"Three beers? Besides, look at this place!"

The pool was green and quiet. Damsel flies hummed over the surface at the edge away from the fall where water cabbage floated, leaves like huge furry clams. Along the northern bank heliconias with leaves as big as canoe paddles made a dense wall between the forest and water on one side. No one would see.

Jane shook her head. "No. I can't swim."

"Well, you could just paddle a bit." Cleis's body gleamed like polished hardwood. "The floor slopes gently. No danger of falling into a pit. And I'm here."

I know. "I'd rather not."

"The water's cool."

Jane was aware of sweat running over her stomach, trickling down the small of her back, itching behind her knees. Swimming would be lovely. She almost moved. Almost stood up and took off her shirt, but years of habit and training brought her up short just as effectively as a chain around her neck. "No." It came out flat and hard.

Cleis's eyes narrowed. "What is it? You don't think a bare-assed Latina is good enough to swim with?"

"It's not that."

Cleis stood with her hands on her hips. "What then?"

Jane drained the bottle of its last, warm mouthful. *Armored, inviolate, safe.* "You wouldn't understand." Immediately, she knew she had said the wrong thing.

"So. Now I'm stupid as well as inferior. What is your problem, Lady Jane? You drive in here, cool as cut glass, and act like you're queen of the fucking world. You smile at me so politely and ask me questions for your damn article. You take my picture, you listen to me rambling on, but you give me nothing. Not one thing. Why? Because deep down you think you're better than me. Better than everyone."

"No. That's not it. It's just that . . ."

Cleis lifted her eyebrows, waiting, and Jane realized that she was being goaded. For once, she allowed it.

"Why is everyone so eager to show everything to everyone all the time? Everywhere you look there are people being stared at: television, film, video, magazines, newspapers. Close-ups taken from a mile away, such huge scale that pores look like craters. You can't hide anything. Everyone looking, being looked at. Gossip columnists. Stalkers. Tell-all biographies. Desperate actors having their faces sculpted to look like last week's star. It never stops." She was panting.

"What exactly are you afraid of?"

Jane blinked. "What do you mean, what am I afraid of? These people are being eaten alive! Everything they do or say is consumed by a greedy public. A woman's child is mown down on the street and the cameras are there: tracking her tears, recording the snot on her chin, following the way she shifts from foot to foot because she needs the bathroom. Sometimes they follow her *into* the bathroom. Once you start giving them something, once they see the hairline crack in your armor, they're there, driving in, wedging you open, spilling your guts."

"I still don't understand why it bothers you so much." Jane stared at her. "Look, suppose they wired up your bathroom and made a tape of you taking a dump, complete with groanings and strainings, so what? So fucking what. It's something every person on this earth does. Nothing to be ashamed of."

"But it's private! It's my life. . . ."

"You don't have a life. You're so afraid someone will take it away you haven't allowed yourself one."

"No! That's not—"

"Then why are you so scared?"

Cleis gestured at her own nakedness, at Jane in her hot, itchy clothes, the cool lake, the empty jungle. All of a sudden, horrifyingly, Jane did not know why. She was twenty-nine years old and had spent her whole life hiding behind a mask and she did not know why. She had denied herself so much: never had a lover, never been naked in public, never been drunk or screamed out loud with pleasure except in the privacy of her own apartments. She had never had a friend, never had a real argument, never wept over a dead pet.

She looked blindly out over the water. Normal people swam naked and did not care. She was not normal. She did not know what she was, or who. She wanted to lay her head down on the turf and cry: grieve for all those lost years. But even now the habit of privacy was too strong.

"It's never too late to change," Cleis said. And she waded out into the pool and dived underwater.

Jane watched the ripples. She knew she could not swim naked in that pool. Not today. But she could, at least, get drunk.

The sun was sinking when she woke. She sat up, and her head thumped. There were mosquito bites on her legs and one already swelling on her left breast. She looked around. Cleis's clothes were gone.

She knelt down and splashed her face with water, trying to think. Beer bottles clinked. She gathered them up, then felt foolish and put them down; counted them. Twelve. And Cleis had had three, four at most. She swayed and realized that she was still drunk. But she never got drunk.

"Cleis!" She climbed carefully up the western slope to the purdah house. "Cleis!" She listened, walked south toward the glyph-covered walls, stopped. She heard something, a vague scrabbling coming from the tumbled remains of a masonry wall.

Cleis was half lying, half sitting against a stack of newly fallen stone. Her left arm hung useless and bloody. She was swearing, very quietly, and trying to push herself upright.

"Cleis?"

Cleis smiled lopsidedly. "Fucking thing." She sounded cheerful. Shock, Jane decided.

Jane peered at her eyes. They were glassy. "Do you hurt anywhere except your shoulder?"

"Shoulder?" Cleis looked at it. "Oh."

"Yes. Do you hurt anywhere else? Did you fall, bang your head?" Cleis's left arm was broken by the looks of it, and the gashes on her shoulder would need stitches. There was no sign of a head injury, but you could not be too careful.

"... fucking thing knocked the wall down on purpose. Kill that fucking thing. . . ."

It was getting dark. She needed to get Cleis to a safe place. First she needed to make a sling.

She touched the buttons of her shirt, hesitated. *Does it matter?* Oh, yes, it still mattered. But there was no real choice. She shivered, despite the heat, then wrenched it off, trying not to imagine a grainy telephoto image of her breasts appearing on newsstands around the country. She draped the shirt around Cleis's neck, tied the sleeves together. "Help me, damn it." But Cleis was lost in a world of shock and pain. Jane thrust the arm into the support.

Later, Jane never really knew how she managed to get them both back down the trail safely. She womanhandled Cleis out of the rubble and laid her on the smooth grass. Cleis was too heavy to carry far, Jane could not drag her by the arms. . . . She took off her belt, slid the leather tongue under the small of Cleis's back, under and around Cleis's belt, then threaded it through the buckle. Tugged. It should hold.

The forest was hot and close. The light was going rapidly. Jane plodded along, dragging Cleis behind her like a sled.

Two thirds of the way down the trail, Ixbalum was there, standing in the leaf shadow, eyes invisible. *Eyes. Cameras. Don't think about it.* "Help me." She did not know if Ixbalum understood or, if she did, whether she cared. "Please."

Ixbalum turned and said something over her shoulder. Two men with the same sloping foreheads and close set eyes of figures depicted in thousand year old glyphs stepped from behind her.

"Be careful," Jane said, half to Ixbalum, half to the men. "Her arm's broken."

Ixbalum gestured for Jane to move aside. Jane stayed where she was. If she could just keep hold of the belt that connected her to Cleis she would not feel naked. "She might have hurt her head, too." The men stepped around her. One gently pried the belt from Jane's hand.

"It was a jaguar," Cleis suddenly said, very clearly.

"What—" But they were picking Cleis up and Jane had to scramble to follow them down the trail.

The tallow candle flickered and sent shadows dancing over Cleis's sleeping face. On her chair by the bed, Jane huddled deeper into the coarse cotton wrap that Ixbalum had held out to her without comment, and tried to stay awake. She felt feverish with too much sun and alcohol and fatigue, and she wondered when Ixbalum would be back.

Cleis opened her eyes. "This isn't our shack."

"You're in Ixbalum's house. How do you feel?"

"I don't know yet. Confused. What happened?"

"A wall fell on you. About eight hours ago. Don't move your arm. It's splinted."

"Broken?" Jane nodded. Cleis closed her eyes. Opened them. "Help me sit up." She hissed with pain when Jane lifted her. "Feel like I've been run over by a truck." She wrinkled her nose. "What's that terrible smell?"

"Some salve or other Ixbalum put on your shoulder. You have some bad cuts."

"On my left shoulder?" She seemed tense. Jane nodded. That answer did not seem to please her. "Anything else?"

"Just bruises."

"Where?"

"Legs, mainly."

"No . . . blood?"

"Except from your arm, no."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

Tears ran, sudden and silent, down Cleis's cheeks. Jane looked around; there was nothing in Ixbalum's hut that might do as a tissue.

"You're all right." Jane realized she had never had to reassure anyone before; there had always been someone else, someone closer to do the comforting. "Really. No head injury. And your arm should be fine in a few—"

"I'm pregnant."

Jane did not have the faintest idea how to respond.

"I found out for certain in Benque Viejo. Just over three months gone." Jane got up, dipped her a bowl of water from the barrel by the door. "Thank you." She looked up, met Jane's eyes. "Aren't you going to ask me if it's good news?"

Cleis seemed thin and vulnerable, her eyes big, and Jane wished she knew how to comfort her. "Is it?"

Cleis nodded. "I'm forty-one. I've never loved anyone enough to have a child with them. Last year I realized I probably never would. So I decided to have one on my own. It took me ten months of trying. I thought that wall coming down. . . ." She was crying again. This time Jane wiped away the tears with her hands.

"You're all right. You're all right."

"I'm sorry." And Jane thought she might be apologizing for more than the tears.

After a while, Cleis looked around at the smooth adobe walls, the herbs hanging from the roof. "Where's Ixbalum?"

"She went out about two hours ago." They had not exchanged a single word. Jane had just watched while the Mayan woman washed Cleis's wounds, slathered them with an already prepared salve, bound them. When Ixbalum had gestured for her to help with the split-branch splints, she had.

"I want to get out of here."

So did Jane. She never wanted to see Ixbalum, and those golden eyes that had seen her naked, again.

Cleis pushed aside the glass of water and the pills that Jane was holding out. "I don't want them. Not yet. I don't know what's going on, but I don't like it." She was flushed, sweaty. Jane wondered if she had

made a mistake encouraging Cleis to walk back to their shack so soon. At least she was lying down now.

"Take the pills. You have a fever, and your arm must hurt."

"Of course it hurts. Christ knows what crap she put on it. How do I know my arm's not rotting off?"

They had already been through this. "I watched her wash it. She seemed to know what she was doing." She should have come here and got the first aid kit, proper antiseptics, antibiotic creams, but she had been too drunk, too shaken up from the conversation by the pool. And Ixbalum had been so . . . competent. She said, again, "I don't know what the salve was but it was fresh—moist, green-smelling—and the bowl looked clean."

"But why was it fresh? How did she know I'd need it?" Cleis was getting more and more fretful.

"Just take these pills. Everything will seem better when you've had some sleep."

Cleis plucked for a moment at the blanket. "Oh, give me the goddamn things then." She swallowed them. "Now will you listen to me?"

Jane sighed. "Go ahead."

"I was looking at the glyph wall, wondering what was under all those vines, thinking maybe I should start clearing them away the next day, when it suddenly struck me how, I don't know, how orderly the vines seemed. So I squatted down and had a closer look: they were growing from the dirt an even eight inches apart. They'd been cultivated. To hide the glyphs. I stood up, thinking maybe I'd tug on them a bit, see how—"

"No wonder the wall came down!" Jane's voice was loud with relief, and it was then that she realized how scared she was.

"But I didn't actually pull on them. I was just thinking about it."

"You'd been drinking. We both had. All that beer . . ." *Go to sleep*, she was thinking. *I don't want to hear this.*

"I didn't touch that damn wall. The jaguar did it."

Jane closed her eyes. Those dreams of danger and golden eyes.

"Did my face look like that when you were telling me about the jaguar that followed you home from the ruins?" Cleis reached out, grasped Jane's wrist. Her hands felt thinner, dry. "Listen to me, Jane. Just listen. Don't think, not yet. A jaguar knocked down that wall, wounding my shoulder, my left shoulder, like those young women in the glyphs. Ixbalum knew we were coming, and that I was hurt. She had to know, there's no other explanation for the salve and her appearance on the trail. How much do you bet that some of those herbs hanging upside down from her roof are the same as the plants pictured on the glyph wall?"

No, Jane thought, and felt the same fear as that day when she had turned around and seen a jaguar print crumbling inside her own tracks. "You're feverish," she said firmly. "Maybe there was a jaguar, yes. Maybe the ruins have become the stamping grounds of some solitary cat. But that doesn't alter the fact that you need to get to sleep. Now. You need to get some rest and get well."

Cleis was pale now, her lids drooping. "You believe me, I know you do. Because you're scared. I'm scared." Her chin was sinking onto her chest now, eyes barely open. "Ritual wounding . . . How did she know?" Her eyes closed. "Fucking thing. You'll see. . . ."

Jane sat where she was for more than half an hour, watching Cleis sleep, telling herself that Cleis was wrong.

Jane half woke in the middle of the night. Her muscles were relaxed, soft; she felt content. Across the room moonlight showed a tangle of blankets pushed back from an empty bed. There was some reason why she should be disturbed by that, but she was already falling back to sleep.

The next time she woke moonlight and shadow patterns had moved further along the wall, and Cleis's bed was no longer empty. She crept out of bed, padded over to the other bunk. She must have dreamed that Cleis was gone, earlier. Cleis was sleeping soundly, naked as usual. Jane checked to make sure no blood was seeping through the bandages, then simply watched her for a while.

Cleis woke late the next morning. Jane brought her water and fruit, checked her fever. "Not as bad as yesterday, but still too high for you to be out of bed."

Cleis twisted restlessly under her blanket. "You should be out working. Just because I have to spend the damn day in bed wasting precious time doesn't mean the rains are going to come later than planned."

"Your color's better," Jane said.

"Well, I hurt. My legs, my shoulders . . . strange places. All my tendons feel pulled."

"You'd better take some painkillers."

"I don't want any more drugs." She touched her stomach. "Anyway, they give me strange dreams. I feel exhausted from running around the jungle in my dreams." She looked up at Jane crossly. "Now what's the matter? I'm fine. I'll take the damn pills. Go do some work."

Work, at least, would mean she would not have to think.

"And before you go, hand me those notes. I can be of *some* use." Jane picked up the nearest camera case, opened the door. "And Jane, I think I was a bit delirious last night. Said some wild things. Just forget it, okay?"

Jane nodded mutely.

Cleis's fever lasted three days. She was up and about before then. "Don't tell me I should rest. I'm fine. Never better. I don't need two good arms to study the glyphs. And the rains won't wait."

The first couple of days at the site, Jane kept a surreptitious eye on Cleis, but gave up when Cleis caught her at it and glared. They worked in silence, Jane moving crabwise with camera and tripod along walls, changing filters, checking light levels; Cleis making notes, taking measurements, staring blankly at the trees and muttering to herself.

On the fourth day, Jane got back to the shack to find Cleis sitting on

the bed with her notes, and the remains of the splint piled in a heap on the table. "I took it off," Cleis said. "My arm feels fine. It was probably just a sprain."

There was nothing Jane could say. She cleared away the mess.

Something had changed since Cleis's accident: children now ran past their shack, playing games, and more than once Jane had seen villagers walking through the trees to their milpas, mattocks on their shoulders. They had greeted her with a smile and a wave.

Sometimes, too, she would look up from her camera to see Cleis and Ixbalum together, out of earshot, talking. Jane wondered why Ixbalum was now willing to speak to Cleis; wondered what she was saying, what craziness she was spilling into Cleis's eager ears. But she did not ask. Instead, she tried to push Cleis from her mind by working from first light until last. At night she would lie down, exhausted, and fall into a troubled sleep. Her dreams were vivid and fractured. More than once she woke to find Cleis gone from her bed. *Where do you go?* Jane wanted to ask, *and how?* But she never did. She imagined Cleis and Ixbalum gliding through the jungle, looking into the dark with their golden eyes. . . .

One night her dreams were jumbled images: time running backward while she watched the ruins reform into a city; vast storms overhead; Cleis talking to her earnestly, explaining. "Ixbalum doesn't care what I know anymore. It doesn't matter what the children tell me. I'm hers now." Jane woke drenched in sweat. She looked over at Cleis's bed: she was sleeping like a baby.

Am I going mad?

She needed to get away. She got out of bed, pulled on her clothes.

She waited until just after dawn to wake Cleis. "The photography is ahead of schedule, and we need supplies. I'm driving to Benque Viejo. I'll be gone two or three days."

Jane had expected to reach Benque Viejo, walk through its streets, loud with traffic and thick with the stink of leaded gasoline, and come slowly out of her nightmare. All the time she was pulling Belize dollars from her wallet for bottled gas and beer and canned food she wondered when it would stop feeling strange and dangerous to be back in the world.

She booked herself into a hotel and took a bath, but the water was only lukewarm and she found herself longing for the lake with its water cabbage and kingfisher.

After weeks of eating fish and fruit and corn, the steak dinner was alien and almost inedible. She left a tip on the table and walked from the restaurant into the street. The sky was dusky pink, streaked with pearl gray clouds. She wished Cleis could be there to see it. And then she knew she did not want to spend three days here in Benque Viejo when she could be at Kuchil Balum. The rains would be coming soon. There was no time. Because when the rains came, Cleis would go back to New Mexico, and she . . .

What is happening to me? She did not know. All she knew was that she had to get back.

It was mid-afternoon of the next day when she parked in front of their shack. Cleis was not there. *Probably at the site. No matter.* Jane took her time unloading the supplies, nervous about seeing Cleis again.

Then there was nothing left to do; she had even washed the enamel plates that had been lying on the table—the same plates she and Cleis had eaten from the night before she had left for Benque Viejo. She tried not to worry. Cleis had probably been eating straight from a can, too busy to take the time to prepare anything. She checked the shack one last time, then set off for the ruins.

The waterfall fell peacefully, a flock of black and orange orioles wheeled about the crown of a tree at the edge of the clearing, but there was no Cleis.

"Cleis!" The call echoed back, and Jane remembered the last time she had called to Cleis here. Had something else happened, something worse?

She ran through the ruins, calling, ducking in and out of half-excavated buildings. Nothing. Maybe she was at the village, talking to Ixbalum.

Two women stood at the well, a man plucked a chicken on his doorstep. They looked up when Jane ran into the clearing. "Cleis?" she asked. They frowned. "Cleis?" she asked again, pantomiming curls falling from her head. "Ah," they said, and shook their heads.

Jane ran to Ixbalum's hut. The door was closed. She banged on it with her fist. No reply. She banged again, then pushed her way in.

Without the candles, the hut was cool and dark. There was no one there. Jane brushed aside bunches of herbs on her way back to the door, then turned around again and plucked a leaf from each bundle. She could look at them later, see if any matched the ritual leaf on the glyphs.

She was just putting them in her pocket when Ixbalum came in.

The Mayan woman stood there with her arms folded, looking at Jane, looking at the floor where one leaf lay in the dirt. Jane picked it up and put it in her pocket with the others. This woman had already seen her naked, and drunk, and she was too concerned for Cleis to feel any shame at being found in Ixbalum's hut. "I want to know where Cleis is."

Ixbalum said nothing. Jane could feel herself being studied. This time she did not cringe.

"If you know where she is, I want to know. She's pregnant, and I think that fall was more of a shock than she knows. I want to take her away from here." *Do I?* "I'm asking for your help."

Ixbalum moved so suddenly that Jane thought she was going to strike her, but Ixbalum reached up past Jane's left ear and drew a leaf from one of the bunches. She held it out to Jane.

"I don't understand." But she did.

Ixbalum shook the leaf in front of Jane's face. The message was unmistakable: Take it. Jane did. Ixbalum nodded, very slightly, then made a *Go now* gesture and turned her back.

Not knowing what else to do, knowing only that it was pointless shouting when neither understood the other, Jane went back out into the sunshine. The leaf was a big one, dull grey-green now, but it would have been bright when fresh, the color of the paste Ixbalum had smeared on Cleis's shoulder. It had six points, and a tracery of veins like a spider's web.

Night came as a rising cloud of living sound. The creaky chorus of thousands of insects rubbing together chitinous legs and wing combs echoed and reverberated through the trees. Fireflies streaked the dark with yellow.

Jane lay on her back on her bunk. Her arms were grazed and scratched from pushing aside branches, being caught by unexpected thorns. She had cut her palm on a frond of razor grass. Her throat was sore from calling. For the first time she was unclothed and not covered with a sheet. She lay naked to the world, as an offering. *Please come back. Just come back safe.*

Cleis returned at dusk the next day. She pushed the door open and walked in slowly. Her hair was filthy, her face drawn. She stopped when she saw Jane. "You're back early." Her voice was flat with exhaustion.

Jane wanted to touch her face, hold her, make sure she was all right. "I got back yesterday. I've been waiting, and worrying. I went out looking." Cleis swayed a little. "It's dangerous to get too tired out there."

Cleis sat down on her bunk, sighed and closed her eyes as she leaned back against the wall. "I didn't know you'd be here to worry."

"I just . . ." Jane did not know how to explain why she had come back early. "I just wanted to know where you've been."

Cleis's eyes flicked open. Underneath, her skin was dark with fatigue, but the eyes themselves were bright, intense. "Do you? Do you really?"

Jane took a deep breath; she felt very vulnerable. "Yes."

"The simple answer," Cleis said, over a cup of hot tea, "is that I don't know where I've been." They were sitting at the table, a Coleman lamp drawing moths that fluttered against the screen. Jane had insisted that Cleis eat something, rest a little, before talking. "The complex answer. . . . What do you know about dreaming?"

Jane was momentarily thrown off balance. "Not much."

"Dreams are something I researched in my twenties, a long time before becoming interested in Mayan civilization. Simply stated, the human brain exists in three parts, one cobbled onto the other, communicating uneasily, each with different . . . behaviors. There's the first evolutionary stage, the reptile or R-complex, the crocodile brain whose realm is sexual,

aggressive, and ritual behavior. Then when mammals evolved from reptiles, they developed the limbic system, which meant they perceived the world differently—in terms of signs, and vividly sensory and emotional images. To do this, they had to bypass the crocodile brain, suppress it. They couldn't ignore it altogether, though, because it controlled a lot of the body's physical functions: the urge to fuck and fight and eat."

"What does all this have to do with where you were last night?"

"I'm getting there. Anyway, mammals found a way to turn the R-complex, the crocodile brain back on, harmlessly, during sleep. Which means, of course, that our dreams are the crocodile's dreams: sex and food and fighting." Her eyes were bright. "Haven't you ever wondered why we get clitoral erections during dreams?"

"No."

"Then some mammals developed the neocortex. We became self conscious. Ever wondered why you can't read or do math in your dreams?"

Jane opened her mouth to say she had never noticed whether or not she could, then remembered countless dreams of opening books only to be frustrated by meaningless squiggles.

Cleis noticed and nodded. "The neocortex handles analytic recollections. It's usually turned off when we dream. That's why dreams are so hard to remember. When I change, I become a mammal with no neocortex. My waking state is like a dream state. When I change back, when I wake, I remember very little. So, in answer to your question: I don't know where I've been."

There was a bubble of unreality around Jane's head, around the whole room. She concentrated on her hands, neatly folded together before her on the table. *My hands are real.* "What are you trying to tell me?"

Cleis reached out and touched those neatly folded hands. "I think you already know."

Jane felt very calm. She pulled the six-fronded leaf from her pocket. "You believe in this."

Cleis said nothing.

"You think . . . you think that those glyphs on the purdah wall are true. That the ritual wounding has purpose." She remembered Ixbalum shaking the leaf in her face. "You think your accident wasn't an accident. That Ixbalum infected you with some kind of, I don't know, changing agent, a catalyst. That you can become . . . that you change into a jaguar."

Now laugh. Tell me it isn't true. But Cleis just nodded. "Yes."

"Do you know how that sounds?" Her voice was very even, but her heart felt as though it was swelling: so big it was pushing at her stomach, making her feel ill.

"You've seen the evidence with your own eyes—"

"I've seen nothing! A wall, some pictures, some leaves. You got drunk, pulled the wall on top of you, broke your arm and probably took a bang on your head. Ixbalum fixed you up. You disappear at night and come back looking like hell, with a pseudo-scientific explanation that basically

boils down to this: you can't remember and you're not responsible. All the evidence points not to the fact that you've discovered some mystical Mayan rite, but that something is wrong in your head, and getting worse." She put the leaf down carefully on the table. "Look at it. Look at it hard. It's just a leaf."

"I've read the dates on the stelae, Jane. Kuchil Balum, Place of the Jaguar, was occupied up until the sixteenth century."

"What has that got to do with—"

"Think!" Cleis's voice was thin and hard, bright as wire. "The lowland Mayan culture began to die more than a millennium ago: population pressure, some say, and crop failures, but I'm fairly sure it was more to do with a loss of faith. But not here. Here the power of the gods was tangible. Young girls from every family were sent to the purdah house at puberty. They were ritually wounded, infected. Some changed, most did not." She searched Jane's face. "Every family had the opportunity, the chance to join the elite. That welded the community together in ways we can't even begin to comprehend."

A moth fluttered frantically against the window screen.

"But even jaguar gods can't stand against guns and missionaries," Cleis continued. "So they pulled down their beautiful stone buildings and built themselves a village that appears unremarkable. They hid, but they've kept their culture, the only Mayans who have, because they have people like Ixbalum."

They sat for a moment in silence. Jane stood up. "I'll make some more tea."

She busied herself with the kettle and teapot. There had to be a way to get Cleis to see past this delusion; some way she could persuade Cleis to pack her bags and leave with her and have her head x-rayed. She did not know what to say, but she knew it was important to keep the dialogue open, to keep Cleis anchored as much as possible in the real world.

The kettle boiled. Jane brought the pot to the table. "It's not the same without milk," she said.

Cleis smiled faintly. "Being an ignorant American, I don't think it's the same without ice."

She seemed so normal. . . . Jane asked sharply, "When you change, how do you think it affects your child?"

Cleis looked thoughtful. "I don't know." She leaned forward. Jane could feel Cleis's breath on her face. She wanted to strain across the table, feel that breath hot on her throat, her neck. "You haven't asked me how it feels to change. Don't you want to know?"

Jane did. She wanted to know everything about Cleis. She nodded.

"It's like walking through a dream, but you're never scared, never being chased, because you're the one who's dangerous. I'm not me, I'm . . . other."

"Other?"

"Here, now, I have a sense of self, I know who I am. I can use symbols. It's . . ." She frowned. "It's hard to describe. Look at it this way." She

patted the table. "I know this table is made of wood, that wood comes from trees, and that this wood is pine. Underlying all that knowledge is the ability to work in symbols—tree, furniture, wood—the ability to see beyond specifics. When I'm changed, symbols, words . . . they become meaningless. Everything is specific. A barba jalote is a barba jalote, and a chechem is a chechem. They're distinct and different things. There's no way to group them together as 'tree.' The world becomes a place of mystery—unknowable, unclassifiable—and understanding is intuitive, not rational."

She toyed absently with the leaf.

"I'm guided by signs: the feel of running water, the smell of brocket deer. The world is unpredictable." She paused, sighed, laid her hands on the table. "I just am," she said simply.

The rainy season was not far off. The days were hotter, more humid, and Jane worked harder than before, because when she was busy she did not have to deal with Cleis, did not have to look at her, think about how her skin might feel, and her hair. She did not have to worry about getting Cleis to a hospital.

The nights were different.

They would sit outside under the silky violet sky, sipping rum, talking about the jungle.

"The jungle is a siren," Cleis said. "It sings to me." Sweat trickled down the underside of her arm. Jane could smell the rich, complex woman smells. "Especially at night. I've started to wonder how it would be during the rains. To pad through the undergrowth and nose at dripping fronds, to smell the muddy fur of a paca running for home and know its little heart is beat beat beating, to almost hear the trees pushing their roots further into the rich mud. And above, the monkey troops will swing from branch to branch, and maybe the fingers of a youngster, not strong enough or quick enough, will slip, and it'll come crashing down, snapping twigs, clutching at leaves, landing on outflung roots, breaking its back. And it'll be frightened. It'll lie there eyes round, nose wet, fur spattered with dirt and moss, maybe bleeding a little, knowing a killer is coming through the forest." Cleis's nostrils flared.

Jane sipped her rum. She could imagine the jaguar snuffing at the night air, great golden eyes half closed, panting slightly; could taste the thin scent molecules of blood and fear spreading over her own tongue, the anticipation of the crunch of bone and the sucking of sweet flesh. She shivered and sipped more rum, always more rum. When the sun was up and she looked at the world through a viewfinder she did not need the numbing no-think of rum, but when there was just her and Cleis and the forest's nightbreath, there was nowhere to hide.

And so every night she staggered inside and fell across her bed in a daze; she tried not to smell the salty sunshiny musk of Cleis's skin, the sharp scents of unwashed hair, tried not to lean toward the soft suck

and sigh of rum fumes across the room. Tried, oh tried so hard, to fall asleep, to hear nothing, see nothing, feel nothing.

But there would be nights when she heard Cleis sit up, when she could almost feel the weight of Cleis's gaze heavy on the sheet Jane kept carefully pulled up to her chin, no matter how hot she was. On those nights she kept her eyes shut and her mind closed, and if she woke in the middle of the night and felt the lack of heat, the missing cellular hum of another human being, she did not look at Cleis's bed, in case it was empty.

But one night, Jane woke sitting up in bed with her eyes open after a dream of sliding oh so gently over another woman, sliding in their mutual sweat, and she saw that Cleis was gone.

I'm alone, she thought, and was suddenly aware of every muscle in her body, plump and hot, of her thighs sliding together, wet and slippery, of her skin wanting to be bare. *There are no cameras here*. She laid her hand on her stomach, felt tendons tighten from instep to groin. And before she could really wake up and realize what she was doing—tell herself that this was not the same as being alone in her room, one she could lock—she was standing naked before Cleis's empty bed, before the wooden corner post. It came to mid-thigh, a four-by-four rounded off at the top and polished. She stroked it with one hand, her belly with the other. Her pubic hair was a foot away from the post; a foot, then eight inches, six. She sank to her knees, rubbed her face on the post, held one breast, then the other. One thick drop of milky juice ran down the inside of her thigh. She pressed her belly to the wood, stood up slowly, feeling the top of the post run between her breasts, down her stomach, her abdomen, then moved away very slightly, oh so very slowly, so the post skipped a beat then skimmed the tops of her thighs.

"Oh yes," she said, imagining Cleis lying face down in front of her, moonlight on her buttocks. "Oh yes."

She crouched down, crooning, leaning over the post, palms resting on the bunk, feet braced on the cool dirt floor. She began to lower herself.

The door creaked open. Jane froze. Something behind her coughed the tight throaty cough of a jaguar; another drop of milky juice ran down her thigh. The animal behind her rumbled deep in its chest. Jane did not dare turn around. It rumbled again: *Don't stop*. Her vulva was hot and slick and her heart thundered. The cough behind her was closer, tighter, threatening: *Do it now*.

Jane licked her lips, felt the golden eyes traveling up her achilles, her calves, the back of her knees, the tendons in her thighs, the cheeks of her bottom. She dare not turn, and she dare not disobey, nor did she want to.

"Ah," she said softly and laid her cheek on the sheet. *Between Cleis's shoulder blades*. Touched the rumpled blanket above her head. *Cleis's rough curls*. And lowered herself onto the beautifully smooth oh so lovely rounded and rich wood. *The swell and heat of Cleis*. She moved gently. "Oh, I love you." And she felt breath on her own clenching bottom, the

close attention of whatever was behind her, and suddenly she knew who, what, was behind her and loved her, it. "Yes, I love you," she said, but it was a gasp as she felt the wood round and slick between her legs slide up and down and her breath caught and "Ah," she said, "ah," and she was grunting, and then she felt a sharp cool pressure against her shoulder where claws unsheathed and rested, possessive, dimpling the skin, and she was pulling herself up and over that wooden corner, *Cleis's soft plump slippery-now cheek*, her face tight with effort, and her breasts flattened on the bed as she thrust and her chin strained forward and the muscles under her skin pumped and relaxed and sweat ran down her legs and the room was full of a rumbling purr. Fur brushed her back and she was pressed into the bed by an enormous weight, a weight with careful claws, and the heat between her and the wood was bubbling up in her bones and "Ah!" she shouted, "ah!" hardly able to breathe, and could not stop, not now not now, and she humped and rocked and grunted and came, curling around the bunk *around Cleis* like a fist. Sweat ran from her in rivers; a pulse in her temple thumped.

Claws slid back in their sheaths, the heat and weight withdrew. A throaty rumble: *Don't move*. And then it was gone.

Jane buried her face in the damp sheets that smelled of Cleis, that smelled of her and Cleis, and cried. *I don't know where I've been*, Cleis had said, *when I change back, I remember very little*.

When Jane woke up, Cleis was fast asleep in her bunk.

The mid-morning sun poured like buttermilk over Jane where she knelt on the turf before the glyph wall.

What is happening to me?

She rested her fingertips on the glyphs. "What do you really say?" she whispered.

She was alone. Cleis had gone into the forest that morning, saying she wanted to examine the area for evidence of fruit tree cultivation.

She found herself standing by the fall, staring into the sheeting water, mind empty.

Wake up! she told herself fiercely. *Think. Don't let this just happen to you. . . .* She jumped fully clothed into the water.

She bobbed back to the surface, gasping. It was cold. *Good*. She swam back to the bank, climbed out just long enough to strip off her sodden clothes.

She did not even think about whether or not anyone might be watching.

She dived back in and swam in a fast crawl to the waterfall, let it thunder on her head for a moment; swam again.

This is real, she told herself. *This: sun, water, air. Not dreams, not Cleis's delusions*.

She swam until she was exhausted, then climbed out onto the bank and lay in the sun. She fell asleep.

When she woke, the memory of the dream, the soreness between her legs, was still vivid. She sighed. Her rational mind told her one thing, all the evidence *All my needs* told her another. Which did she want to be real? She did not know.

Her clothes had dried in a wrinkled pile. Jane shook them out one by one and put them back on.

The inside of the shack was hotter than the outside. Cleis had been cooking.

"Here," she said, and handed Jane a tin plate. "Beans and tortillas and fresh corn. Let's eat outside."

Jane wondered where the food had come from, but obeyed silently. Cleis seemed different. Cheerful. Jane wondered if it was anything to do with last night, felt the world spin a little. A dream. It had been a dream.

They sat very close together on the step, arms brushing against each other as they ate. Jane watched the small muscles along Cleis's forearm ripple as she chased beans with her fork, wiped at the juice with her tortilla. Her arms seemed thicker, the muscles more solid than they had been. Jane wondered if that was a result of pregnancy. Women plumped out a little, didn't they? She studied Cleis. Not long ago her muscles had been long and flat, face hollow as though the intensity of her concentration burned away all subcutaneous fat. Her eyes had peered bright from dark hollows. Now she seemed squarer, stronger, more lithe.

"I'd like to take more pictures of you."

"You already have all the pictures you'll need for that article."

Jane had almost forgotten the reason she had come to Belize. She felt as though she had always been here, always eaten from tin plates and drunk rum with Cleis. "I didn't mean that. I mean of you, as you . . . as your pregnancy develops. I want to document your changes."

Changes. The word hung in the air between them.

"Ow!" A sharp pain shot through Jane's left breast. "Christ!" Another shooting pain jerked her arm sending the tin plate flying, beans spattering on Cleis's shorts. Cleis jumped to her feet. Jane clapped a hand to the fire in her breast.

"Move your hand." All Jane could do was gasp. "Move your hand, Jane. I need to see."

But Jane was scared. She did not know what was happening, was afraid to see. "It hurts!"

"Move your hand." This time Jane let Cleis move her hand away, did not protest as she unbuttoned her shirt. She turned her head away as Cleis sucked in her breath.

"What is it?"

"Botfly. It's eating its way out of your breast."

"Get it out! Get it out!" Jane wanted to rip at her breast, at the thing that was eating her flesh, but Cleis was holding her hands.

"Listen to me. Fasten up your shirt again. It's not big. There won't

be any permanent damage, but I have to go get something. Can you do that?"

Jane nodded, thinking Cleis meant to get something from the shack. But Cleis set off down the track that led to the village.

"Wait!"

"I won't be long. Be brave, bonita."

Jane sat with her breast cupped in her hand. *Bonita.*

It must have been from that mosquito bite she got the day Cleis broke her arm. The egg of the botfly had hatched on her skin and burrowed its way down into her breast. Now it was big enough to need food. It would stay in her breast, feeding on her flesh, breathing through the hole it would chew through her skin, until it was large enough to hatch into the botfly. Unless they could get it out. The pain was excruciating.

Bonita.

Cleis returned, slightly out of breath and slick with sweat.

"Chew this." She held out a large dried leaf.

"Where did you get it?" Cleis just looked at her. Ixbalum, of course. "What is it?"

"Tobacco."

"Tobacco? What good will that do? That won't take away the pain!"

"It's not for pain. Just chew it." Cleis tore off a piece, held it out. Jane took it, reluctantly, put it in her mouth, chewed gingerly.

"Tastes terrible."

"Just chew. Don't swallow. No, chew some more." Cleis put down the rest of the leaf and started to unbutton Jane's shirt again. Jane watched her, saw the way the skin around her eyes was wrinkled in concentration, saw the faint sparkle of perspiration on her lip. Jane wondered how those long brown hands would feel wrapped around her breasts. She could feel her color rising. She was afraid that her nipples would harden. She cleared her throat. "How does it look?"

"See for yourself."

Jane, still chewing, looked. There was a hole, no bigger than the knob on her watch, about three inches right of her nipple. So small for so much pain.

Cleis held out her hand. "Spit it out." Jane did, feeling a little self conscious. Cleis pinched off a tiny clump of soggy pulp and rolled it between the strong fingers of her right hand. "This might hurt." She put her left hand on Jane's breast, one finger on each side of the hole, then spread them slightly, so that the pink under her nails turned white and the larva's breathing hole stretched open. Her fingers were very gentle, very precise. Very human. Cleis plugged the hole neatly with the tobacco. "Very brave, bonita. The nicotine will kill it. Then we'll pull it out with a pin." They watched each other's faces as Cleis began to fasten Jane's shirt again, then hesitated. Cleis's eyes were very dark, and a vein in her throat pulsed.

Jane panicked. "The food was nice. Thank you."

Cleis studied her a moment, then half turned away. "Don't thank me,

thank our mysterious benefactor. When I got back this afternoon, I found a little pile of stuff, tortillas, corn, fresh fruit for later, on the doorstep."

Jane closed her eyes against sudden nausea as the real world threatened to come unglued.

Cleis, still not looking at her, did not notice. "They've probably finally figured out we're not burning eyed fanatics clutching bowdlerized bibles in one hand and McDonald's franchises in the other."

Jane nodded, as though she agreed, but she knew: the food was a gift, to their new god.

Every afternoon when they got back from the site there was something: sometimes fruit, or a plucked chicken; eggs; once a clay pot full of some sticky alcoholic beverage. They drank that on the night Cleis used a pin to pull the plug of tobacco, black now, from Jane's breast, and then teased out the botfly larva. Jane held the pin with the skewered larva over the gas ring until it was ashes. She had bad dreams that night, dreams of being eaten alive by wriggling maggots, but when she woke up, Cleis was there. "You killed it, Jane. It's dead."

Most nights, Jane woke up to find Cleis gone. She did not speak of it. *Don't reinforce the madness*, she told herself, but sometimes she wondered whose madness. She felt as though she were being sucked into an increasingly angled world, where the beliefs of Cleis and Ixbalum and the villagers, the evidence of forest and ruin, all made sense, if only she would let go of everything that made her sane. Everything that made her human.

The forest is a siren, Cleis had said, and Jane could hear it singing, day and night.

Cleis was changing, spending more and more time in her own world, content to drowse on the warm, sunlit terraces, or stare off into the distance while Jane worked.

Perhaps it was her pregnancy. Jane did not know much about the process, but Cleis grew visibly more pregnant every day, which she did not think was normal.

"We should take you to Benque Viejo for a checkup," she said one afternoon when Cleis was waking from a nap. "You're too big for four months."

Cleis shrugged. "The process is being accelerated. Jaguar gestation is only three months."

For the first time in her life, Jane deliberately broke an expensive piece of equipment: she threw the camera she was using against a rock and did not bother to pick up the pieces.

Now when Jane woke up in the mornings she could taste the damp in the air, a different damp, cold, spelling the end of their time here.

Cleis seemed to smell it too. She became restless, always moving about, standing up two minutes after she sat down. She was eating less and less, and barely bothered to listen when Jane told her she should eat,

for her own health and her child's. Sometimes Jane would come back from the site and find Cleis staring at something—a pen, the stove—as though it were utterly alien.

Cleis began to stay away for longer stretches: all night, then twenty-four hours.

“Why?” Jane wanted to know. “Why are you doing this?”

“I can't help it. It . . . everything is so simple out there. I don't need to worry about always having to be better than everyone else just to stay in place. I smell the green and it's like opium. It makes me forget.”

And Jane knew she was losing her.

Four days later, Cleis disappeared.

She did not come home one night, or the next day. One night stretched to two, then a week. Jane thought she would go mad. She searched the jungle by day, left messages on rocks and carved words on trees with a knife. She cooked every night, hoping the smell of food would draw Cleis back.

She still went to the site to take pictures. There were probably a hundred thousand glyphs, some of which would not survive another rainy season. And there was always wildlife to photograph. If she just kept taking pictures, Cleis would come back. She would. They would go back to New Mexico together, and Jane would alternately help Cleis put together her notes and visual evidence, and work on a book of photographs of Belize. Everything would turn out all right. She just had to make sure she had everything done for when Cleis returned, before the rains.

One day, walking through the trees with her camera in search of a purple-throated hummingbird, Jane heard a strange noise. A pattering. Something cold hit her face, then her leg, her shoulder. All around her leaves started to bounce, and the stem of a bromeliad trembled as it filled. The patter became a rush.

Rain.

Rivulets of the stuff began to run down the trunk at her back and the rush became a hiss. There was too much water for the forest to absorb and within seconds there was a muddy brown stream running past her feet. A leaf floated past, with a spider balanced on it, as though it were a life raft.

One week became two, then three. Jane wandered in the rain, imagining Cleis as a jaguar, drinking from the new pools, licking rain drops from her whiskers. Jane no longer left written messages, only her scent, and still Cleis did not come.

One night, something woke Jane. She sat up, listened: the rain had stopped. She got up, went outside. All around the shack there were jaguar tracks pressed into the mud.

“Cleis?” But she whispered, afraid. The windows of her shack were screen, and the door flimsy. There were many jaguars in the forest.

When she woke again in the morning, the rain was thrumming steadily

on the tin roof. She sighed, pulled on a long shirt and opened the door to take a look at the world.

There, curled in the mud, naked and still, was Cleis. Jane stood in the open doorway, unable to move, throat tight. Then she ran down the steps and knelt beside her. Cleis's hair was reddish brown with mud and a large scratch stretched over her ribs. She looked nine months pregnant.

"Cleis?" Jane touched her, hesitantly, then jerked back when she felt cold flesh. But Cleis opened her eyes.

Getting her up the steps and into the shack was harder than dragging her down the trail, but Jane managed, eventually. She stripped the covers from Cleis's bunk so they would not get wet, sat her down. "Now you keep still while I put a kettle on."

Cleis sat like a cold soapstone carving while Jane rubbed her down with a towel and talked about the rain, the hot tea she would make, the photographs she had been taking. After a few minutes, Cleis began to tremble. Jane kept rubbing.

"That's right. You're home now. You're safe with me." The trembling became great rolling shudders. Jane wrapped a clean dry towel around her. "You don't have to worry about anything. I'll take care of you." She stroked Cleis's hair. "While you've been gone I've been at the site every day, taking pictures. It's changed with the rains, got more lush." Cleis's eyes were still blank, uncomprehending. "The waterfall used to be so clear but now it's muddy. The other day I saw a turtle sunning itself on the bank. . . ." She talked on and on, about everything and nothing, until she felt a hot tear splash on her shoulder. Then she made the tea, guided Cleis's hand to the cup. Watched until she was sure Cleis would hold the tea without burning herself.

"Good. Now you drink that all up while I put a fresh sheet on this bunk, and then we'll get you tucked in nice and cozy and you can sleep for a while." Cleis watched her while she made the bed. Her eyes were deep sunk, surrounded by grainy brown circles the color of tannin. "There. Everything will look better after some sleep."

In sleep, Cleis looked fragile. Her eyelids were delicate with purples: lavender, indigo, violet. Her face was drawn, leached of color; a kind of dirty tan. She had kicked the sheet down to her waist and Jane could see that her breasts were a different shape.

She would give birth soon.

But that's impossible.

Jane sighed. She no longer knew what was possible and what was not. All that mattered was that Cleis had come back. She stroked the lean hand lying on top of the sheet. The fingernails were filthy now, and ragged, but Jane only saw the way that hand had opened her shirt, weeks ago, had gently moved away her own hand, had made her feel better.

She lifted the hand and kissed it. "Oh, I have missed you." Cleis slept on. "As soon as you're well enough, we'll leave this place."

She got up and started packing.

Cleis slept for nearly ten hours, then woke up long enough to be fed some soup. When the soup was gone, she went back to sleep.

When it got dark, Jane lit all three Coleman lamps, even though the heat was overwhelming. If Cleis woke up in the middle of the night, the first thing she wanted her to see was light. Bright, artificial light. She stood by Cleis's bed, hesitating: the other bunk was covered in open suitcases and piles of clothes. Moving them would wake her. Jane drew back the sheet and fitted herself carefully around the strange mix of bone and muscle and pregnancy that was Cleis, and fell asleep almost instantly.

When she woke up it was still the middle of the night. Cleis was whimpering, burrowing into her neck. "Sshh, sshh. I'm here. What is it?" But then Cleis was clinging to her and crying and Jane was stroking her side, shoulders arms side of breast ribs belly-bulge hip and back, up and down, telling her it was all right, it was all right, and then the heat Jane felt was more than the hiss and spit of Coleman lamps, more than the warmth of a humid Belize night. And Cleis was no longer sobbing on her neck but kissing it, and the arms wrapped so tightly around her were pulling her in, until their mouths were almost close enough to touch, and Jane's arm was under Cleis's neck, supporting her head, and her leg was wrapped over Cleis's and her other hand stroking her breast, her hips, her thighs.

"Kiss me," Cleis said.

Jane expected her lips to be dry and rough, but they were soft as plums.

At first they made love as though they were underwater: coming together too fast, bumping, drifting apart, but then they were moving together, rising toward the surface, a roaring in their ears, and the muscles in arms and thighs and belly were clenched tight as each breathed the other's breath as though it were the only oxygen available.

"Show me I'm real," said Cleis, and slid her palm up to the hot slick between Jane's thighs. "Come in my hand." And Jane did.

They lay in each other's arms, slippery as newborns, while Jane kissed Cleis's forehead, again and again.

"I've packed almost everything," Jane said as they ate breakfast. Cleis was wearing a long shirt. Nothing else would fit her. "We need to get you to a clinic as soon as possible. You look like you're ready to give birth any minute."

Cleis rested a hand on her belly. She nodded but did not say anything.

"I'll check the jeep as soon as we've had breakfast." Jane decided not to mention her worries about the passability of the trail in this wet weather. "Will you be all right for the journey?"

Cleis moved her eyes sideways, lifted her shoulders slightly in a *Who knows?* gesture.

"Well . . . do you feel well enough at this moment?"

Cleis nodded, then seemed to realize she would have to give more than

that. "Everything is very strange for me. Different. Sitting here, talking to you, is like looking through a kaleidoscope. Someone keeps twisting it out of shape, and then I don't know who you are, or who I am, or what we're doing here. Talking is sometimes . . . difficult."

Jane did not want to ask the next question, because she was scared of the answer. But she had to know. "Do you . . . is leaving what you want to do?"

Cleis hesitated, then laid a hand on her belly and nodded. Jane knew she would get no more from her for a while.

They set off at midday. It was cold, and pouring with rain. Jane helped Cleis to the passenger seat, more because of Cleis's mental state than any physical disability. Cleis moved easily, muscles plainly visible beneath her skin. Once she was in the jeep Jane wrapped several shirts around her bare legs.

It was slow going. Twice, Jane had to climb out of the jeep and tuck canvas under rear wheels that could find no traction in mud. But she did not mind the rain or the mud or the cold: she was getting Cleis to safety.

All this time, Cleis sat in her bundle of clothes, silent and distant.

Eight miles down the trail they came upon a tree that had fallen across their path. Jane turned off the engine. "Stay here. I'll go take a look."

The trunk was too big to drive over and the undergrowth on either side of the trail was too thick to drive through. Jane walked back to the jeep. "I'm going to try to hack us a path around this thing." She reached under the driver's seat and pulled out the machete. "Just stay here and keep the windows and doors locked." Cleis did not seem to hear her. Jane rolled up both windows and locked the doors, hesitated, then took the car keys. "It might take a while."

Jane hurried, swinging the machete heedlessly through vines and flowers. Her arms were aching and her face itched with spattered sap by the time she had a path cleared.

She hurried back to the jeep. "That should—"

Cleis was gone. A pile of empty clothes lay on the passenger seat.

"No," Jane said quietly, "not now." She would not let the forest have her. "Do you hear me?" she bellowed. "I won't let you have her!"

She crashed through the undergrowth, smashing past branches, pushing through tangles, the machete forgotten. She had no idea how long she trampled through the forest, blinded by grief and rage, but eventually she found herself by a stream, sobbing. She wiped the tears away from her eyes. Maybe Cleis was already back at the jeep. Maybe she had just wandered off for a moment then remembered who she was. Yes. She should get back to the jeep.

But the jeep was still empty. Jane sat behind the wheel, staring into the trees until it was dark. Then she switched on the lights and drove back to the shack.

She did not unpack the jeep. For the next five nights she left a Coleman

lamp burning on the step, just in case. She barely slept any more, but wandered through the trees, calling. On the sixth night she did not go back to the shack. Perhaps if she stayed out here, lived as Cleis lived, she could understand. Her back itched: her shirt was filthy. She took it off, left it hanging on a branch.

That night she slept curled up on a tree bough, like a jaguar. Like Cleis. She woke hours later, heart kicking under her ribs. Did jaguars dream of falling?

The next day she wandered aimlessly through the forest, eating fruit where she found it. She ran her hand across the surface of a puddle, wondered what it would be like to have paws heavy enough to break a paca's back, how it would feel to lean down to lap with a great pink tongue, to see the reflection of round golden eyes and white whiskers. She wandered. Time ceased to mean anything much.

Maybe it would not be so bad to walk through the forest on four feet. The world would look very different, but things would become very simple. And she would be with Cleis.

She found herself back at the shack, taking a large knife from the table. It did not take long to get back to the ruins. She knelt by the glyph wall. She would cut open her own shoulder and ask Ixbalum to give her the change salve. Then she could join Cleis. They could be together. She laid the knife against the muscle of her left shoulder, and cut. Her blood was shockingly red, the pain incredible.

She blinked at the knife. "What am I doing?"

She had to find a way to get Cleis out, not to lose herself. She threw the knife away from her, and stood up, holding her arm. The cut was deep. It needed cleaning up. She had to get back to the shack.

That night, as she lay on her bunk, bandaged shoulder aching, the endless chorus of frogs and insects fell silent. Jane was suddenly full of hope. She pulled on her boots, and went to the door. Then she heard it, a low moaning yowl, like a cat in heat. A big cat. The yowl leapt to a scream, then another. The scream turned into a tight cough. She heard harsh panting, hissing, and then that terrible scream.

"Cleis!" Cats sometimes fought over territory. Jane snatched up the lantern and ran out into the dark, following the noise. Fifty yards into the trees, the screaming stopped, and there was a thrashing in the undergrowth, then silence. Jane ran harder.

There was no sign of the cat, but it had flattened an area of undergrowth with a diameter of about ten feet, and the grass was covered in blood. She cast about for tracks, or a trail of blood, anything. There was nothing. Exhausted, she headed back to the shack and lay down, refusing to imagine what might have happened to Cleis.

Someone was shaking her shoulder. Jane opened her eyes. Cleis stood before her naked, gaunt, holding something. Must be a dream. Cleis was pregnant.

The shaking did not stop.

Gaunt. Jane sat bolt upright. Cleis was holding a baby. "Take her. She can't stay with me." Cleis thrust the child at Jane, then opened the door.

"Wait!"

"I can't. She's been fed. Take her away from here."

"No. I'm not going anywhere without you." Jane climbed out of bed, scrunched the blanket into a nest, and laid the child down. "I'll follow you, leave the baby here."

"You can't."

"I can. I will. You're not well, Cleis. You need to leave with me. I want you to. Please." Cleis stood, uncertain. "Don't you want to?"

"Yes!"

"Then why don't you?"

"I can't!" Cleis backed up against the wall.

Jane sat down. She did not want Cleis to bolt. "Come and sit. Just for a moment. We'll have some tea."

"No. I can't, Jane. I really can't. I have to stay here. Under the trees. It's where I belong now. I need to stay."

"You need to look after your child."

"No. Don't you see? It's stronger even than that. I need to be out there, to live. I need it, like I need water, or air."

"I'll follow you. I'll leave the child here and I'll follow you."

"Then she'll die," Cleis said, sadly. And it was that sadness, that resignation that finally told Jane that Cleis would not change her mind. Could not. That Cleis would rather run through the trees than stay here, or anywhere, with Jane. If it was not for the tiny life on the bed. . . .

"What if she . . . what if she grows up to be like you?"

"She won't. If you take her away. She'll never miss what she's never had."

"I love you."

"I know. I'm sorry." She moved to the bed, picked up the baby, put her in Jane's arms. "Love my child for me."

They did not say goodbye.

She wrapped the child carefully in a clean shirt and walked down to the village. Two women took a look at her face and went back inside their huts. Ixbalum's hut was empty. A bunch of children gathered at the edge of the trees. Jane stood in the middle of the clearing and addressed the air. "Where is Ixbalum?"

A chicken clucked.

"Where is Ixbalum?"

A woman put her head out of a hut and called to one of the children, shouting instructions. The girl listened, looked sideways at Jane, then darted into the forest. Jane waited patiently. The baby in her arms yawned and opened its eyes. They were the color of brand new copper pennies.

The girl came back with Ixbalum.

"You did this," Jane said finally. She thought she saw pity on Ixbalum's

face, but perhaps she imagined it. "I need your help. I'll need milk." She pointed to her breasts, then the child. Ixbalum walked over to her hut and disappeared inside. Jane waited. She did not know what else to do.

Ixbalum came back out holding a pile of soft rags and a gourd. She held them out. The gourd was full of milk. Some spilled on Jane's thumb as she took it. She sucked at it: rich, not cow's milk.

"You knew, didn't you? You knew."

But Ixbalum shook her head wearily and pointed to Jane, to the baby, and made a flicking motion with her hand. It was unmistakable: *Go away*.

"I'll go for now, because that's what she wanted. But you better . . . you keep her safe for me. Just keep her safe."

The journey to Benque Viejo was not difficult. No more trees had fallen across the skidder trail and the baby, whom she called Penny, because of her eyes, slept soundly in the cardboard box Jane had strapped into the passenger seat. She stayed in Benque Viejo only long enough to buy diapers and baby formula and a feeding bottle, fill tanks with enough gas to get her to the capital city, Belmopan, and to make a phone call to the niece of the ex-governor, on Ambergris.

"Katherine, I want someone who will fill out a birth certificate, no questions asked."

"Who on earth for?"

"My adopted child."

Silence. "Well, that's a turn up for the books. Are you sure? What will people think if you get back to England with a baby in tow . . .?"

"I don't care about that anymore." And she did not. She really did not.

She climbed back in the jeep. Penny opened those startling eyes, stretched. Jane wondered if she would look like Cleis when she was older. ●

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RING OF SWORDS

by Eleanor Arnason

Tor, \$21.95 hc; Orb, \$13.95 pb

The title of this one sounds like undistinguished heroic fantasy, but don't let that fool you. Arnason's fifth novel is far-reaching SF with an anthropological slant, very reminiscent of Ursula K. Le Guin.

Set in the twenty-second century, the novel begins at a biological research station on a distant planet where Anna Perez is studying the indigenous lifeform: huge alien "jellyfish" that flash colored lights in a primitive form of communication. Much to Perez's annoyance, the planet is also the site of diplomatic negotiations between humans and an alien race who call themselves *hwarhath*. The humans call the *hwarhath* "the enemy," a name that accurately reflects the interaction of the two races over the forty years since contact. Every *hwarhath* ship the humans have ever met has been heavily armed. There doesn't seem to be any such thing as a *hwarhath* civilian.

Arriving for the first meeting of the conference, the *hwarhath* spring a surprise: they have a human captive in their midst, Nicholas Sanders. Perez is mildly intrigued, wondering why the aliens would bring a prisoner to a

diplomatic meeting. But the diplomatic authorities are keeping a lid on the news, and Perez returns to the study of her jellyfish, a much more interesting subject, as far as she is concerned. Later she learns that Sanders is acting as a translator for the alien general. From all indications, he is a traitor—the first human known to have allied himself with an alien species.

A few days later, Sanders (accompanied by two guards, one human, one *hwarhath*) comes to her research boat and asks Perez about her studies of the jellyfish. Predictably, the next day, the military intelligence officer calls her in to report on the meeting. Sanders continues the relationship, although he knows that intelligence agents of both sides are monitoring every syllable. Their conversation stays on neutral subjects, but the intelligence officer pushes Perez for as much information as she can provide about Sanders.

Eventually, the military decides to kidnap Sanders, and drafts Perez to create a diversion. The plan goes spectacularly wrong, and suddenly Perez finds herself (along with the human diplomats) being held prisoner on a *hwarhath* ship. It turns out that the *hwarhath* have a special interest in her. The *hwarhath* females, whose culture

differs in many ways from that of the males, have become interested in the human race and in human women in particular. Perez has been chosen as a representative of her species. While the males carry on their diplomatic talks, she will talk with the *hwarhath* women. Sanders makes it clear that her conversations are every bit as important as the official negotiations.

At this point, the novel goes into high gear, paradoxically just as the plot changes its focus from the external action of the first part to more cerebral conflicts. We eventually learn that the *hwarhath* want to know what sort of opponents human beings will be in an all-out war (which they consider inevitable, even desirable). Their culture places a high value on male aggression, and part of their reason for expanding into space was the search for a worthy opponent for the race. But at the same time, war involves rules; it is necessary to know whether the humans can be trusted to play fair. And only by understanding the species as a whole can the *hwarhath* decide whether to treat humanity as people, or as pernicious vermin to be exterminated without mercy. It is abundantly clear that, if the *hwarhath* decide to destroy us, they have the means.

The meeting of the races takes place on several levels, as Perez meets a number of *hwarhath* of various classes and learns many surprising things about them. Ettin Gwarha is the general to whom Sanders is a personal assistant, and with whom he is rumored to carry on a sexual relationship. (We eventually learn that Sanders has

a sexual interest in a number of *hwarhath* males.) Eh Matsehar is "the best male playwright of his generation," who is translating *Macbeth* into his native language, although he is apparently disturbed by the rampant heterosexuality in the text. Lugala Tsu is a hereditary rival to Ettin, powerful by virtue of his position although he is in some ways far less competent.

But Perez is more surprised by the women of the enemy race. Almost their first question is how humans can permit males, trained in violence, to live with the women and children of their species. Gradually, the culture of the *hwarhath* reveals itself as the product of rigid segregation of the sexes: even theater is divided into "hero plays" and "women's plays" (along with "animal plays," considered suitable for the young). Contact between the sexes is discouraged, and reproduction is carefully distinguished from sexuality. The *hwarhath* women are appalled at the human population explosion, especially the proliferation of males in close proximity to females. And the right of humans to the status of "people" seems to be more and more in doubt, the longer Perez talks to the enemy women.

After a long time, the tension again breaks out into physical action—I don't want to get more specific, so as not to ruin the plot for anyone. Suffice it to say that the conclusion has enough violence to make up for the relatively placid middle section, and that the ideas proposed in the middle section are fully realized in the final third of the book. Arnason examines the

question of gender roles in human society from several angles, doesn't dodge the tough questions, and resists the temptation to throw out easy answers. And yet, the plot compels the reader to keep turning pages, and the analysis of society is effectively integrated into the structure of the novel as a whole. This is social SF at its best. Put Arnason on your "must-read" list.

THIS SIDE OF JUDGMENT

by J.R. Dunn

Harcourt Brace, \$21.95

Dunn's first novel is a tough near-future thriller set in Montana, where the local police discover the nude, mutilated body of a dancer in the snow. The same day, a computer intrusion is detected at the local bank. Ross Bohlen, an investigator for a federal agency, the Computer Subversion Strike Force (COSSF), decides that the two incidents are related. On the basis of that hunch, he travels to Montana, looking for a "chiphead," one of a number of cybernetically enhanced humans who were the result of an experiment billed as the next step in evolution—until the chipheads became murderously insane. Officially, all the chipheads were killed in a massive government raid several years ago; Bohlen has evidence that the official story is wrong. Not waiting for authorization, he heads west to search for the chiphead he knows must be there.

The novel takes place in a future a few years after the Latin War, in which the Frontero Liberación Aztlán has invaded the Western U.S., slaughtering the Anglo population and burning the cities. Mon-

tana is still full of refugees displaced from California and the southwest. The increase in population in little mountain towns has brought an increased crime rate. To take up the slack, many law-enforcement tasks are now handled by vigilante units. At the same time, on the Federal level, COSSF is only one of a new group of agencies that have grown up in response to the new threats to society.

Bohlen is considered a loose cannon by his own superiors, and his arrival on the scene in Montana reinforces that image. He begins by provoking a confrontation with a vigilante team, then barges into the local sheriff's office with an attitude that sets the entire force against him. Only the arrival of a large COSSF team headed by Bohlen's old partner, Floyd Delahanty, manages to lower the tension enough for the two groups to find common ground. The search for the killer begins in earnest.

Meanwhile, the reader has gradually become aware of another group of characters. Jason Telford is a man living in a shabby apartment on the fringes of a bombed-out New York City, trying to keep the authorities from noticing him—or the microchip implanted in his skull. Then a phone call forces him into action: a man named Page has arrived in Montana, and has made contact with the small group of computer enhanced humans living in hiding there. Page is perhaps the most violent of the surviving chipheads, and his presence there poses a threat to the entire group—especially if the COSSF learns that he is on the

scene. Reluctantly leaving his hiding place, Telford heads for Montana, knowing that he will eventually have to confront Page.

The rest of the novel is a tense game of cat and mouse, with Bohlen, Delahanty, the local police, Telford, and Page all pursuing their separate agendas. Bohlen, once a fanatical enemy of all chipheads, now wonders if some sort of peace might not be possible; Delahanty, a cannier politician, wants a smooth operation with as few feathers ruffled as possible; the local cops want to prove that they can handle things in their own back yard. Telford sees himself as caught between Bohlen and Page, two forces of irrational hatred. But he also lives in fear of the madness that Page and other long-time chipheads are prey to, a madness that has caused many of his closest friends to kill themselves to escape the pain. His only goal is to protect those whose only crime is having accepted the implants, years before. As for Page—Page has a deeper, more sinister plan than any of those trailing him are aware of.

The author weaves together these different strands with fine control, covering the action from half a dozen contrasting viewpoints. Bohlen's tough-guy personality is a new version of the cynical streetwise investigator every fan has seen a hundred times, right down to the patented wisecracks. Telford is a convincing man on the run, an innocent fugitive much in the vein of other persecuted SF supermen. The minor characters are well drawn—especially the Montana deputies, wary of the COSSF

outsiders but still concerned over the threat to their community, and at the same time trying to keep their private lives in order. And Page is an elemental force, a man beyond the edge of civilized behavior.

The novel as a whole is a complex vision of Dunn's bleak future society, the antecedents of which are apparent in today's news. The war-torn America of Dunn's novel is haunted by the threat of the chipheads in much the same way that the America of the early 1950s was haunted by the specter of communism. As a result, the novel takes on a strong aura of that darker era, when the *roman noir* was in full flower. Page, Bohlen, and Telford live in an pervasive atmosphere of quasi-paranoia, in no way weakened by the fact that their enemies are not imaginary, but real and extremely dangerous.

Dunn builds the tension effectively, and the resolution of his plot is at once inevitable and surprising. A very effective, stylishly written, first novel by a writer whose short fiction has attracted a good deal of attention.

ALIEN HEAT

by Lynn S. Hightower
Ace, \$4.99

Lynn S. Hightower is another writer exploring the SF/mystery overlap. *Alien Heat* is the third of Hightower's "Elaki" novels (the others are *Alien Blues* and *Alien Eyes*). These make up a series of quirky police procedurals featuring Detective David Silver, set in a future in which Earth has been invaded by benevolent but superior aliens.

In some ways, the police procedural is the most natural form of mystery to import into SF: the mundane details of police work and the methodical gathering and analysis of information have a lot in common with the world-building techniques many SF writers already use. (It's worth noting that Isaac Asimov's *The Caves of Steel* and Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man*, two of the classic SF mysteries, are both procedurals.)

Hightower sets her series in a not-too-distant future; I don't believe she ever specifies a precise date, but the overall feeling is perhaps fifty years from now. The biggest single change in the world as we know it is the arrival on the scene of the Elaki: tall aliens shaped somewhat like manta rays with hands at the edges of their "wings." The Elaki are arrogant, chauvinistic, and too powerful to resist; they have already taken over most of the best restaurants and hotels, and human beings find themselves rapidly becoming second-class citizens, much as any natives in the face of more powerful colonists from abroad.

The Elaki are not only ahead of Earth in terms of technology, but in social science, where they long ago found solutions to many of the problems plaguing the human race, including many varieties of mental illness. The Elaki take this as an excuse to meddle in other human institutions like law enforcement, politics, and health care. They are also a major new presence in criminal enterprises, where they make human criminals look like amateurs. So David Silver, a homicide detective in Saigo

City (which is, from internal evidence, a slightly altered Louisville) finds himself teamed up with String, an Elaki homicide detective.

A great deal of the fun of the series comes from the often riotously comic interplay between Silver and String. String is a very good and very earnest detective, but his ideas about human society are often stunningly off-base, and his ability to warp the English language is a marvel. (A line chosen almost at random: "Have spoken with a one who believes Bowser remains given the heave-ho at site of origin.") But Hightower finds material for comedy almost everywhere: in the bizarre pets Silver's wife brings home, in the Elaki response to human food (they put cinnamon in *everything*), and in Elaki-designed talking cars that nag their drivers about safety.

At the same time, Hightower gives mystery fans a gritty, hard-nosed cop story, in a well-realized future urban setting. Silver's investigation begins with an arson in a supper club patronized by humans and Elaki. The fire spreads to a nearby house, killing several inhabitants in addition to the patrons of the not-quite-respectable club. At the same time, Silver's higher-ups assign him to a missing-person case, involving the wife of a rich man from Chicago. He is annoyed at the assignment, especially when he learns that a psychic is also working on the case. (For reasons we learn later, Silver is highly distrustful of all psychics.) Eventually, of course, the two cases turn out to be connected, and to throw unexpected light on

Silver's own past... but I don't want to give away too much of the plot. Suffice it to say that the crimes are interesting, and the process of solving them a convincing extrapolation of present-day police methods.

Hightower manages to convey the feeling of real police work while still presenting a solid, lived-in future city. The cops use hardware recognizably descended from today's, but a good bit more powerful and sophisticated—although prone to realistic failures and glitches. And Hightower has thought out a good many of the secondary and tertiary elements of law enforcement in her future, from crowd control to recovery of evidence. But she also knows that the final link in solving any crime is the human element—integration of the evidence by actual policemen. Hightower's cops are multi-dimensional characters, whose talk and interplay does a great deal to make the story as a whole more credible.

David Silver's personal history is an important element in Hightower's portrait of her future world. Abandoned by his father at an early age, and raised in the slums of Little Saigo, Silver joined the force out of idealism—an idealism that has not been entirely beaten out of him by years on the job. At the same time, over the course of three novels, Silver has gradually become more and more alienated from his wife Rose, a former DEA investigator who has now become an animal rights activist. They have three small children (very realistically portrayed), and only his fear of what might

happen to them without him has kept Silver from bailing out of his marriage. In *Alien Heat*, this theme comes to a crisis point, emphasized by the proliferation of decaying and unhappy relationships throughout the plot.

Hightower's "Elaki" series effectively runs a range from delicious comedy of manners to stark portrayals of violence and social breakdown without missing a beat. SF readers who also enjoy mysteries will find Hightower's books of particular interest, but they stand very well on their merits as straight-ahead SF, comparable in many ways to the best of Connie Willis. Highly recommended.

THE HOLLOWING

by Robert Holdstock
ROC, \$17.95

With *The Hollowing*, Holdstock returns to the world of his World Fantasy Award winning *Mythago Wood* for another plunge into Ryhope Wood, a patch of primordial English forest that holds the stuff of dreams—and nightmares. Two sequels, *Lavondyss* and *The Bone Forest*, have expanded the scope of Holdstock's original vision, but the new book proves that the potential of the scenario is far from exhausted.

The protagonist is Richard Bradley, whose friend Jim Keeton vanished into the wood—only to return a year later, babbling of strange visions, then dying in the hospital before Bradley's eyes. Bradley's son Alex is deeply affected by Keeton's death, retreating into a private world. Eventually, he follows Keeton's path into the wood, and leaves his

parents to sort out their already deteriorating relationship. A body identified as Alex's turns up, and the authorities declare the case closed. Bradley is ready to accept their verdict—until he returns to the house on the edge of the wood, and finds that someone has been looking for him—someone who knows things that only Alex could know.

Convinced that his son is still alive, Bradley follows a strange woman, who claims to be one of a research team, into the wood. There, he is introduced to a group of explorers—many of them anthropologists who have entered the wood to trace the myths that somehow become reality within its confines. These myths-made-flesh are the “mythagos”: powerful beings who have destroyed more than one unwary explorer of the wood.

Bradley's quest for his son is of peripheral interest to the others in the camp he discovers inside the wood. They are mostly interested in the mythagos, cataloguing their aspects and changes, and tracing the bizarre geometry of the apparently small patch of forest that somehow becomes infinite once one penetrates its borders. And, as Bradley learns, the juvenile imaginings of his son have as much power as the creations of the greatest poets of antiquity. In fact, they call up monsters of enormous primordial strength. It is because of these that the exploration team has decided to bring Bradley into the wood.

The other explorers convince Bradley to adopt a slow approach to exploring the wood; after all, nobody really understands the force

that underlies the wood's ability to turn human hopes and fears into powerful physical beings. But when the seasoned explorers fall victim to an earthquake—clearly some manifestation of the power of the wood—Bradley begins a deeper exploration of the wood, especially of the hollowings, paths that seem to lead to distant locations by routes that follow no geometry comprehensible to human senses.

Before Bradley can find his son, the mythagos come looking for him. A ship that arrives out of nowhere to beach upon the shore of the lake where the anthropologists have laid their camp turns out to be the *Argo*, full of the heroes of ancient Greece. But these are curiously unpleasant heroes, crippled and long past their prime, led by a cynical Jason whose ethics are basically those of a pirate. As if the Argonauts' attempts to rob or enslave him are not enough distraction, at the same time Bradley is drawn into Native American myths, dominated by the trickster god Coyote—drawn from the subconscious of the woman explorer who brought him into the wood. And he begins to learn of the unusually powerful mythagos drawn from Alex's teen-aged understanding of the myths he has read from various cultures. Bradley eventually realizes that only by delving into the depths of an adolescent imagination can he make sense of the wood.

But Holdstock is not writing a puzzle story to be resolved once the hero learns to decipher the mythical underpinnings of his predicament. The workings of the imagination are not so easily dismissed. Instead, Bradley must physically

defeat his adversaries, playing by the rules of the mythological worlds they inhabit. The explorers of Ryhope Wood deal with opponents of legendary stature, and the struggle takes place on many levels.

Meanwhile, Bradley has learned that Alex is trapped by the hostile creatures of his own imagination. Based in part on the medieval poem "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," these creatures have mutated into vicious predators that would tear the boy apart if he attempted to escape the ruined castle where he has taken refuge. Eventually, of course, Bradley finds Alex and manages, ultimately, to rescue him. But the course of the plot is by no means direct; Ryhope Wood has very few straight paths in it.

Holdstock's virtuoso mix of mythology and psychology is made even more enjoyable by his keen sense of the reality underlying his fantasy. The scenes of Alex in his refuge, surrounded by monsters, have a dark, menacing tone that nonetheless carries a hint of the boy's playful imagination. Holdstock's portrayal of Jason and the Argonauts as near-barbarian thugs is a marvelous commentary on the difference of myth and historical fact. And the author's command of language is an additional source of pleasure; there is an interesting turn of phrase on almost every page.

Obviously, Holdstock's "Mythago" scenario can incorporate any body of myth. As in Philip José Farmer's superficially promising but finally disappointing "Riveworld" books, where every hu-

man being in history seems to be on stage at once, this wealth of material is not without its dangers. A dish seasoned with everything in the spice cabinet is unlikely to please anybody. It is to Holdstock's credit that after four books, the wood and its mythagos retain their ability to surprise and delight the reader. This is masterful fantasy, close to the cutting edge of the genre.

GENE RODDENBERRY: THE LAST CONVERSATION

by Yvonne Fern (with a Foreword by Arthur C. Clarke)

University of California Press,
\$20.00

One of a series entitled "Portraits of American Genius," this book records the highlights of conversations with the creator of *Star Trek* during the last months of his life. The author shows extensive familiarity not only with the *Star Trek* universe, but with a wide range of classic SF. And she takes her subject seriously, granting Roddenberry a forum for expounding not only his ideas about the TV show, but a broader philosophy that both he and his interviewer feel lies behind the show, in all its manifestations.

The book pays almost no attention to behind-the-scenes gossip, offstage antics, and personalities. Nor, despite the author's obvious depth of knowledge about *Star Trek*, does she involve herself in minutiae of Trek history and lore. There are plenty of books for fans interested in those dimensions of the show. And while important biographical material receives its proper emphasis—in particular

Roddenberry's World War II experiences, and his marriage to Majel Barrett—Fern was not especially interested in the externals of his life and career. Instead, she pushed her subject to define himself and his beliefs, and to comment on how they were reflected in *Star Trek*.

Roddenberry's responses to her questions were often remarkably frank, although he asked her to keep some of the material under wraps until twenty years after his death. Fern's background—she spent several years as a Franciscan nun—makes her in some ways a perfect interviewer for Roddenberry. The magnetic appeal of *Star Trek* (indeed, of SF generally) is to some degree inherent in its frequent willingness to take on issues that in other eras were considered the exclusive property of religion. Of course, Roddenberry's thoughts and opinions may strike one reader as profoundly true and another as trivially obvious; some will find Fern's writing warm and sincere, others, gushy and sentimental—probably to the same degree as they would apply those judgments to the show itself.

But like it or not, *Star Trek* is a dominant presence in the science fiction world. Whatever the world at large thinks of science fiction nowadays, it almost certainly bases its opinion primarily on *Star Trek*. More people chosen at random are apt to recognize a line like "Ye canna change the laws of physics" than (for example) "Think of it as evolution in action." I even met one fan who knew of Mark Twain only as a character in one episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

As Roddenberry says at several points in the course of the interviews, anyone who wants to reach a mass audience has to deal with certain realities of the media and of the audience. *Star Trek* has dealt with them more honestly than most of what we see on television.

While it is easy enough for intellectuals to scorn a pop phenomenon like *Star Trek*, it seems self-limiting to dismiss something that obviously touches an enormous segment of the population. Fern's book goes directly to the well-springs of the show's appeal; thoughtful readers will find it worth a careful look.

THE OVERLOOK FILM ENCYCLOPEDIA: Science Fiction

Edited by Phil Hardy: illustrations by the Kobal Collection
Overlook Press, \$50.00

This handsome-looking volume is essentially a reprint of the 1984 *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction Movies*, updated to include films released through 1990. In fact, except for the new material and minor changes in the front matter and appendices, the "new" version is line for line the same as the earlier book. This is unfortunate; the error-ridden text of the original edition would have benefitted from extensive correction.

On the plus side, Hardy and his co-contributors have assembled an impressive list of classic and little-known SF films, including a surprising variety of foreign-language films. The entries are arranged chronologically, and there is a wealth of early still shots and other visuals to give the flavor of

the subject. Each entry contains a list of actors and other principals, a brief plot summary, and often some attempt to put the film in critical or historical context. While odds against most of the foreign and pre-World War II films covered ever turning up at the local video store are very long indeed, there are plenty of fascinating glimpses of other cultures' approaches to SF movie-making.

The pages on silent features are especially interesting, and full of insight on the early importance of special effects, one of the earmarks of SF film through the years. The book reaches out to include a wide variety of thrillers, comedies, and other material frequently overlooked by canon-makers: the James Bond films, *Abbott and Costello Go to Mars*, even *Transformers: the Movie*. And the book's critical judgments are often thought-provoking.

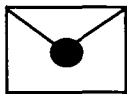
But the book's errors are pervasive and embarrassing—among them the preface to the new edition thanking a number of experts who sent in corrections, none of which appear to have been made. Just to mention a few goofs I spotted (and I am hardly an expert), the article

on the 1931 *Frankenstein* erroneously states that the monster is killed in a fire in the scientist's laboratory (the death scene takes place in an old mill). The article on *Alien* interestingly compares the film to H.P. Lovecraft, but misspells "Necronomicon" and dates Lovecraft a generation too early. The classic *Forbidden Planet* is wrongly described as set on a world with two suns (it is set on the fourth planet of Altair, which is not a double star). Hank Davis of Baen Books kindly let me look through his copy of the original edition, and pinpointed dozens of other errors, ranging from misidentification of actors to incorrect plot summaries—not to mention forced interpretations (*The Incredible Shrinking Man* as Cold War allegory).

For readers who know enough to steer around its inaccuracies, *The Overlook Film Encyclopedia* is probably useful as a checklist and broad-spectrum history of SF film (despite a few capricious omissions, e.g., *King Kong*). But its unreliability on matters of fact seriously diminishes its value, especially for non-experts. Approach with caution. ●

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NEXT ISSUE

(Continued from page 38)

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The Spring con(vention) season gets an early start, with some new cons. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons with a music keyboard as Filthy Pierre—Erwin S. Strauss.

FEBRUARY 1995

3-5 **CremeCon**. For info, write: Box 37986, Milwaukee WI 53237. Or phone: (414) 223-3243 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Milwaukee WI (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Manchester East Hotel. Guests will include: Elaine Bergstrom, Kris Jensen, Ishtar, Brian Thompson.

3-5 **ClubCon**. (800) 529-3976 or (216) 673-2117. Independence OH. Gaming meet by the AndCon folks.

3-5—**DOW**. (617) 522-0387 Woburn Day's Inn near Boston MA. Nigel (LaCroix) Bennett, of the "Forever Knight" show.

3-5—**TranSept**. Royal Cambridge Hotel, Cambridge UK. An SF folksinging con. P. Allcock, J. Shoji.

3-5—**WinterFest**. (800) 266-3111. Travelodge, Victorville CA. A model rocket flying meet.

10-12—**HurriCon**. (904) 862-7323. Fort Walton Beach FL. Aldridge, Baric, Haines, Roen, Weis.

10-12—**Winter Fantasy**. Hyatt Regency & MECCA, Milwaukee, WI. Fantasy gaming meet, by D & D folks.

17-19—**KatsuCon**, Box 11582, Blacksburg VA 24062. Holiday Inn, Virginia Beach VA. Japanese animation.

17-19—**Boskone**, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. Sheraton. D. W. Jones, Sanderson.

24-26—**Oz Rendezvous**, Box 31672, St. Louis MO 63131. (314) 271-2727. Las Vegas NV. For Oz fans.

24-26—**ConCave**, Box 3221, Kingsport TN 42135. (615) 239-3106. Park Mammoth Resort, Park City KY.

24-26—**SheVaCon**, Box 2672, Staunton VA 24402. Sheraton Inn, Harrison VA. Hanson-Roberts, Jacobs.

24-26—**RadCon 1C**, 2527 W. Kennewick Av. #162, Kennewick WA 99336. Tower Inn, Richland WA. Engh.

MARCH 1995

2-4—**World Horror Con**, Box 148, Clarkston GA 30021. (404) 921-7148. Sheraton Colony, Atlanta GA.

3-5—**Egyptian Campaign**, SIUSGS, OSD, Student Center, Carbondale IL 62901. (618) 529-4630. Gaming.

10-12—**Bash**, Box 1108, Boston MA 02103. Holiday Inn, Taunton MA. Artist Bob Eggleton. Star Trek.

JULY 1995

13-16—**DragonCon**, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 925-2813. N. American SF Con (NASFIC). \$45.

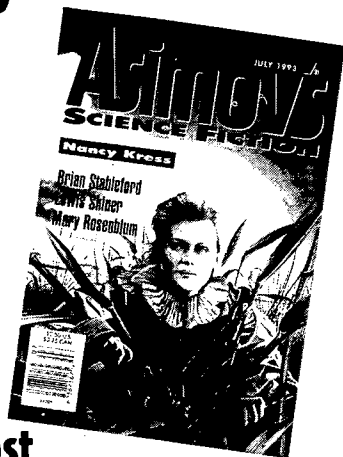
AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection**, Box 15340, Washington DC 20003. (301) 345-5186. Glasgow UK. WorldCon. \$125.

AUGUST 1996

29-Sep. 2—**LACon III**, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. Anaheim CA. WorldCon. \$90; \$110 in July.

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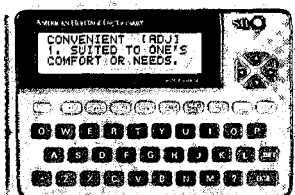
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